

Bolingbroke and his Agnostic-Rational View of the World: Searching for the Religious Foundation of the Enlightenment

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ABSTRACT

This essay attempts to identify and illuminate one of the religious bases of the Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinkers assumed that the secular world was governed by rational laws and rules, which could be understood by the use of reason. They sought to identify the laws of the physical and moral world through experience and reason. However, this empiricism alone does not logically need to lead to another assumption, that is, the idea of the rationality of the world. The latter assumption has many origins. Here, I would like to concentrate on one of them, that is, the transformation of deism. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries deists assumed that the world was rational, an aspect that the Enlightenment thinkers agreed with. In addition, the deists were very eager to prove the existence of God, a goal that the Enlightenment thinkers did not, by and large, agree with. Thus, the Enlightenment thinkers presupposed an agnostic-rational view of the world that depended greatly on the ideas of deism but with which the deists themselves could not agree. For this situation to arise, it seems that the Enlightenment must have necessarily been preceded by the transformation of deism, or some part of it, into an agnostic philosophy. I will consider this aspect with reference to the work of Bolingbroke.

Keywords: the Enlightenment, deism, Bolingbroke, epistemology, religion

JEL Classification Numbers: B11, B31, B41

1 Introduction¹

Was the Enlightenment founded on secularization, or on a revision of the Christian view of the world? In the early twentieth century, this debate first arose, the

¹In revising this essay, I would like to thank Prof. Christopher Berry for his comments, which were of great help.

former view being held by Ernst Cassirer² and the latter by Carl Becker.³ In my opinion, both are partially correct.

Certainly, many philosophers of the Enlightenment, such as David Hume, Adam Smith, and Voltaire, intended to and to a certain degree did collect almost all the information of the secular world, and analyzed it on the basis of certain principles, so that they could build a secular view of the world by experience and observation (if we do not set the goal of the Enlightenment for Kant). Diderot's *Encyclopédie* (1751–72) is a typical example of this approach, as are Hume's science of man; Smith's general principles of morality and economics; and Voltaire's history of the world.

However, the empiricist presupposition itself cannot logically lead to another presupposition in which almost all worldly things operate under some law or working principle that reason can identify. The latter presupposition needs an intellectual basis other than that of the former because experience and observation do not necessarily provide positive support for the idea of the rationality of the world. Therefore, it can be supposed that Enlightenment thinkers probably had some rationalist beliefs as well as the empiricist assumption. This rationalistic presupposition seems to have several intellectual or religious origins: for example, the scientific revolution, Newtonianism, the natural law tradition, and so on.

What I would like to take up in this essay is one of these supposed origins, that is, the religious view of the world, particularly in terms of the transformation of deism. The deists assumed a rationalistic world, which seems superficially similar to that of the Enlightenment. Thinkers in a natural law tradition also might assume that the human world is rational, but their focus is largely limited to legal, political, and affairs. In addition, certainly, Cartesians might hold this rationalist belief. However, their method is based not on a posteriori but on a priori principles. By contrast, the Enlightenment thinkers, in many cases, developed some principles from the information they had gathered. Thus, Cartesians differ from Enlightenment thinkers due to the latter's adoption of empirical methods. Furthermore, the intellectual curiosity of Enlightenment thinkers was much wider and deeper. They sought to develop a general body of knowledge of all the secular fields, for which they intended to identify rational rules and principles. This evidently needed a certain intellectual background other than the natural law tradition and Cartesianism, specifically requiring rationalistic foundations and an empirical methodology, one possible source of which was in the kind of deism advocated by Bolingbroke. Generally, deists such as John Toland and Samuel Clarke presume a rational world, but they also

²Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C.A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove. (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1915).

³Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1932).

strongly intended to prove the existence of God by reason. By contrast, the Enlightenment thinkers, in general, did not seem to wrestle strongly with the latter issue.

However, this does not mean that most Enlightenment thinkers were atheists, or fully secularized; they still occasionally used religious terminology. For example, Adam Smith used religious terms such as “Supreme Being,” “the Deity,” and “the intention of the divinity,” although he rarely used the word “God.” Because the adoption of these words is characteristic of the deists, it might be supposed that Smith had some deist tendencies. In addition, while Smith intended to develop a general secular law and system of human conduct and society, he did not tackle the problem of the proof of the existence of God, regarding the possibility of which the deists had been very enthusiastic. Therefore, Smith seems to have been agnostic as well as rationalistic.

This double position might be similar to that occupied by many other Enlightenment thinkers. However, in order to grapple with the religious foundation of the Enlightenment itself is a big problem and beyond the scope of this preliminary essay. My purpose is instead to examine when and how the transformation of deism into a philosophy characterized by an agnostic-rational view occurred. I would like to concentrate on Henry St. John, First Viscount Bolingbroke, through whom we can consider the transformation of deism. However, first, I shall explain the general background of why I chose to discuss deism and Bolingbroke together.

2 Deism and Bolingbroke

In the early modern period, deism offered a view in which God had created the rational world, which human beings could come to fully understand via the use of reason. Thus, this view was, at least to a certain degree, similar to the rationalistic Enlightenment worldview that emerged subsequently.

Leslie Stephen has offered the classical explanation of deism.⁴ Peter Byrne points out that deism originated from the tradition of natural religion and natural theology, the main founder of which was Thomas Aquinas, who expressed the perspective of natural theology and stated that human reason could, to a certain degree, comprehend a body of truths regarding God and his attributes. However, because human reason was not perfect, a necessary role was also played by revelation. By contrast, in early modern Britain, an expanded role was assigned to human reason. Herbert of Cherbury (1582–1648) emphasized the possible ability of human reason to prove the existence of God; John Locke believed that human knowledge, even of God, was a product of natural human

⁴Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, G.P. Putnam, 1876).

powers, but that in their present fallen state, human beings could not attain complete knowledge of God by reason alone and, therefore, needed Christian revelation.⁵ Thus, these thinkers believed in natural religion, the knowledge gained by which, however, had to be secured by revealed religion. The full elevation of natural religion was performed by English deists such as John Toland, Charles Blount, and Matthew Tindal. They argued that before the Christian revelation, people had already been able to discover the knowledge of God by reason, a situation from which natural religion arose. In addition, they pointed out that God created the unchanging nature of things and human beings, which was knowable by reason.⁶

The deists' impact on the Enlightenment has been given particular attention by Jonathan Israel. He argues that from the 1650s onward, the traditional core of faith and religion was challenged by radical figures, particularly Spinoza, who with other radicals produced the "rationalized," secularized view of religion and the world. Further, argues Israel, it was in opposition to the radical implications of Spinoza's work, by which the older ideological structure had been broken down, but at the same time with the intention of rationalizing prevailing ideas that the moderate mainstream of the Enlightenment—thinkers such as Newton, Locke, Thomasius, Montesquieu and so on—wrote.⁷ "By contrast, the Radical Enlightenment, whether on an atheistic or deistic basis, rejected all compromise with the past and sought to sweep away existing structures entirely, rejecting the Creation ... and the intervention of a providential God in human affairs ... refusing to accept that there is any God-ordained social hierarchy. ..."⁸ The radical stream has been referred to by several writers as *Spinozism*. Israel says, "[t]he claim that Nature is self-moving and creates itself, became indeed the very trademark of *Spinosistes*."⁹ In Britain, Spinoza shocked the intellectual establishment, particularly beginning in the 1670's. Spinoza became the main target and symbol of "philosophical deism and atheism."¹⁰ Spinoza influenced the British deists more than Newton or Locke did.¹¹ Therefore, Israel traces the roots of the Enlightenment to Spinoza and the deists.

In order to refute Israel, Wayne Hudson points out the deists' wide variety of social, political, and intellectual backgrounds and denies their ideological

⁵Peter Byrne, *Natural Religion and the Nature of Religion: The Legacy of Deism* (London and New York, Routledge, 1989), pp. 1–51.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 52–69.

⁷Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 3–11.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁹*Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 603.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 627.

unity.¹² According to him, the deists were inspired by Locke and Hobbes, as well as Spinoza.¹³ However, he concedes that many of them emphasize human reason and a morality relying on human reason without revealed knowledge.¹⁴ “They sought to reform erroneous and superstitious notions and to promote rational schemes which would bring human beings closer to understanding the law-governed natural universe in which they lived.”¹⁵

From my viewpoint, there certainly seems to be some affinity between the British deists and the Enlightenment thinkers, in the sense that both more or less believed in a rational world. However, there is also some degree of difference; while the former were very eager to analyze and prove the existence of God, the latter were less so. How can we explain the cause of this change? Both Israel and Hudson fail us in this regard. Protecting the older structure does not explain the intellectual basis of this change. It seems more natural to think that some collective change of mind might cause this difference. One possible hypothesis is that many Enlightenment thinkers might have presupposed an agnostic, as well as rational, view of the world, in which a Supreme Being had created a world that was rational, but in which His existence could not be proved by human beings. In this essay, I would like to use the work of Bolingbroke to prove this hypothesis. Bolingbroke is said to have influenced Alexander Pope, whose work also influenced Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire, Rousseau, and Smith.

Another possible cause of this change is that before the arrival of Bolingbroke’s and the Enlightenment thinkers’ writings and after the Restoration, English thought was impacted by the rise of the philosophy of latitudinarianism, which, unlike Calvinism, emphasized reason and free will. These ideas became orthodox at the end of the seventeenth century.¹⁶ Deists could use the latitudinarian texts to justify their ideas, although the latter had insisted on natural religion without revealed religion.¹⁷ This atmosphere influenced numerous deistic writings, particularly in the first half of the eighteenth century.

Bolingbroke’s religious ideas have generally been described as deistic. But Hudson rejects this view, arguing that though Bolingbroke was indebted in his

¹² Wayne Hudson, *The English Deists: Studies in Early Enlightenment* (London, Pickering & Chatto Limited, 2009), pp. 26–27, 29.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 85–86.

¹⁴ Wayne Hudson, *Enlightenment and Modernity: The English Deists and Reform* (London, Pickering & Chatto Limited, 2009), pp. 105–118.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁶ Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660–1780, vol. I: Whichcote to Wesley* (Cambridge and New York, Cambridge UP, 1991), p. 1.

¹⁷ Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660–1780, vol. II: Shaftesbury to Hume* (Cambridge and New York, Cambridge UP, 2000), pp. 24–26.

theology and philosophy to many deists, he differed from them in that he felt that there were limits on the human ability to know the truth about God.¹⁸ However, Hudson does not offer reasons for this opinion, or a detailed explanation of Bolingbroke's religious ideas. If we find evidence that Bolingbroke was agnostic, then suddenly the religious ideas of the Enlightenment thinkers might seem more similar to those of Bolingbroke than to those of the British deists. Therefore, Bolingbroke's religious thought seems to be worth understanding.

3 Bolingbroke's agnosticism

First, I would like to argue for the agnostic foundation of Bolingbroke's religious thought. Bolingbroke's view of God is basically agnostic in that he denies the possibility that human beings can obtain direct knowledge of God: "All the knowledge we can have of this kind is derived originally from his works, and the proceedings of his providence. ... He judged this sufficient for us, he gave us to see no further by that lamp of reason which he has lighted up in our minds; and with this, little as it is, we ought to be content."¹⁹

What Bolingbroke continually denies is the existence or possibility of the direct knowledge of God argued for by most divines as well as philosophers. "The systems of theology, which philosophers, priests, and the rabble of the world, conspired to frame, were systems of superstition ... always of more authority than such as human reason could collect from the appearances of things."²⁰ The authoritative opinion of the religious establishment on God, which people are forced to be obedient to, is above human reason, and is arbitrary. "In short, reason has been always controlled, [and] natural religion and natural law have been almost entirely superseded, in every society of men."²¹ With the help of human reason, people can attain some knowledge of God and religion; this constitutes natural religion. For example, "natural religion seems to have been preserved more pure and unmixed in [ancient China], than in any other [country],"²² although China degenerated into superstition and corruption after the ancient period.²³

Furthermore, according to Bolingbroke, the ancient Greek philosophers prefigured some knowledge of divinity similar to the revealed Christian ideas. How-

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 152–153.

¹⁹St John H. Bolingbroke, "Fragments or Minutes of Essays," in *The Philosophical Works of the late Right Honorable Henry St. John, Lord Viscount Bolingbroke In Five Volumes*, vol. 5, (London, 1754), pp. 183–184.

²⁰Ibid., vol. 4, p. 161.

²¹Ibid., vol. 4, p. 161.

²²Ibid., vol. 4, p. 195.

²³Ibid., vol. 4, p. 196.

ever, their thought was not true religion because they did not have knowledge of revealed religion.²⁴ Natural religion had to be supported by revealed religion. Thus, the necessity of revealed religion was clear. ‘The good news of Christianity was published by CHRIST and his apostles; it was confirmed by miracles, and the proof was no doubt sufficient for the conversion of all those who heard the publication of this doctrine, and saw the confirmation of it.’²⁵ However, although true from the beginning, the divine message did not transmit believers directly. As time went by, this proof became ‘traditional and historical.’²⁶ Although the revelation of God itself was true, whether its interpretation by priests was correct or not was uncertain. Thus, every individual, using their human reason, should assess it critically.

Therefore, natural religion, in which human reason checks and establishes the foundation of religion, is necessary. Natural religion is “founded on human nature, the work of God, and on the necessary conditions of human happiness which are imposed by the whole system of it, every man who receives the law of nature receives it on his own authority, and not on the authority of other men known or unknown, and in their natural state as fallible as himself.”²⁷ Here, Bolingbroke made a grand proposal for natural religion, which might mean the radical rearrangement of established Christianity.

In fact, Bolingbroke was of the opinion that Christian priests and divines distorted the word of God. They presupposed that they could attain certain knowledge of God. Certainly,

the method of reasoning a priori, from heaven, if I may say so, that we do not know, to earth, instead of reasoning from earth that we do know, to heaven, was introduced into Christianity with doctrines which the same method had broached in paganism ... and that it propagated fanaticism alike in both. ...

CHRISTIAN fanaticism was more catching, and in that respect more dangerous, than the other ... those of christianity had, besides all these advantages, the word of God himself to produce against unbelievers, and they hawled this word so well to their purposes ... that every side appealed to it in the disputes they had with one another. The consequence was, that every side damned all the rest, and, which was really worse, persecuted them in this world ... Such quarrels turned frequently on metaphysical speculations which no side understood, or on rites and ceremonies of no importance to religion. ...²⁸

²⁴Ibid., vol. 4, pp. 185–186.

²⁵Ibid., vol. 4, pp. 23–24.

²⁶Ibid., vol. 4, p. 24.

²⁷Ibid., vol. 4, pp. 23–24.

²⁸Ibid., vol. 4, pp. 254–255.

Bolingbroke provides two examples of this. One is the invasion of Palestine in the Bible, in which “the immediate commands of God were urged to authorise such extirpations of people, as no other history can parallel. ...”²⁹ Another is the invasion of America by Spain, in which, “when the Spaniards sailed to the conquests of America, silver and gold were their objects, but the propagation of the gospel was their pretence.”³⁰ Bolingbroke’s message—to rely on one’s reason, and not on some authority—requires public tolerance of the use of reason. He opposes allowing any authority the right to impose an external religious belief.

In addition to the religious authorities, some modern philosophers have proposed methods of achieving knowledge of God by a priori reasoning. Among these, Bolingbroke criticized Samuel Clarke, who was known as Newton’s friend, admired the Newtonian system, and advocated the application of the a priori method, which is similar to the mathematical method, to the proof of God and his attributes.³¹ Clarke insisted that the nature of God and his attributes can be proven incontrovertibly by the strict use of human reason.³² However, Clarke argued that the present fallen state of human beings has led to the inappropriate and distorted use of reason, which has in turn caused violent avarice, sinful desires, and superstitions. Therefore, it is necessary for human beings to be taught and directed by some authority.³³

Thus, in Clarke, reasoning a priori results in practice in the affirmation of the religious authority. Bolingbroke saw through this connection, and opposed Clarke’s approach: “Clarke observes, that there is now no such thing as a consistent scheme of theism. A complete one, such as one that presumes to account for the whole order and state of things relatively to God and man, I believe there is not.”³⁴ This kind of systematic scheme is not consistent with the principle of general, individual free use of reason.

Therefore, Bolingbroke’s religious thought presupposes some agnosticism. However, at the same time, Bolingbroke does not insist on the complete impossibility of the knowledge of God. Perhaps, as suggested by Locke, Bolingbroke advocates gaining knowledge of the existence of God through experience and observation.

²⁹Ibid., vol. 4, p. 242.

³⁰Ibid., vol. 4, p. 242.

³¹Samuel Clarke, *A Discourse concerning the Being and Attributes of God, the Obligations of Natural Religion, and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation. In Answer to Mr. Hobbs, Spinoza, the Author of the Oracles of Reason, and other Deniers of Natural and Revealed Religion. Being sixteen Sermons Preach’d at the Cathedral-Church of St Paul, in the Year 1704, and 1705, at the Lecture Founded by the Honourable Robert Boyle Esq.* Third Edition, Corrected (London, 1711).

³²Ibid., p. 8.

³³Ibid., p. 155.

³⁴Bolingbroke, “Fragments or Minutes,” p. 253.

They, who arrived by proofs a posteriori at a demonstration of God's existence, might think very rationally that whatever discoveries they made further concerning his nature, his attributes, and his will, must be made by the same means; and that what could not be so discovered, could not be discovered at all ... and by proceeding in this method they might be sure of acquiring as much knowledge as they wanted, and be safe against falling into error; since to proceed in this method is to follow natural revelation, and, instead of employing our reason about the suggestions of imagination, to employ her about those of nature, which are the suggestions of God himself.³⁵

Thus, to Bolingbroke, human beings could attain some knowledge of God, about which reasoning a priori could result in error, while reasoning by experience and observation could prevent this error. What Bolingbroke emphasized was not how to attain perfect knowledge of God, but how to prevent human fallacy. With regard to the former aspect, he is pessimistic: most human beings may remain ignorant of God's nature. On the latter point, he intended to build a religious theory based on human fallibility, not on human perfectibility. These points might seem to be similar to those made by voluntarist Christians, such as Calvinists and neo-Augustinians, in which human fallibility is also emphasized. But their view of the world is not rationalistic, which is in contrast with that of Bolingbroke.

This idea of human fallibility stems from Bolingbroke's theory of human beings. He criticized any a priori theory of humanity. First, those who advocated the innate moral sense of human beings were false, and tended to become enthusiasts.³⁶ Second, he denounced Grotius and others, "who pretend to deduce our moral obligations from the moral attributes of God".³⁷

... while they boast that man is made after the image of God, they make God after the image of man. What they present to us for a copy, is the original; and what they present for the original, is in reality the copy. Tho we rise from the knowledge of ourselves, and of the other works of God, to a knowledge of his existence and his wisdom and power, which we call infinite ... yet we cannot rise thus to a knowledge of his manner of being, nor of his manner of producing those effects which give us ideas of wisdom and power, and as little, or less if possible, can we rise from our moral obligation to his supposed moral attributes.³⁸

The idea that "man is made after the image of God" is famously advocated by Thomas Aquinas. Bolingbroke denied this Thomistic idea of "imago Dei."

³⁵Ibid., vol. 4. p. 295.

³⁶Ibid., vol. 4, p. 16.

³⁷Ibid., vol. 4, p. 18.

³⁸Ibid., vol. 4, p. 18.

Bolingbroke also criticizes the idea that human beings can participate in the divine intellect, which is advocated by Ralph Cudworth. Bolingbroke argues that “[God] gave us our light. He did not give us his own.”³⁹ The intellect of human beings is not the same as that of God. ‘Of the excellencies of God’s nature we can have no adequate ideas: they are infinite ... we should do much better to rest in these, dark and confused as they are, than to frame others, which, being deduced from our own, are seemingly too adequate to be really true. The past, the present, and the future, as we conceive them, are known alike to the Supreme Being, not by the perception, the retention, or the anticipation of ideas, but in a manner inconceivable by us.’⁴⁰ Here, Bolingbroke denies the neo-Platonic vision, in which human reason can participate in the divine intellect.

At bottom, the divine providence is above human understanding. Cudworth, as well as Aquinas and Grotius, presupposes that the divine intellect is similar to the intellect of the human, which presupposition Bolingbroke denies. Instead, Bolingbroke claims that the nature of God is incomprehensible by the human intellect. Bolingbroke’s vision of the world is agnostic at bottom. Human understanding cannot be perfect and has its limits. But, for him, this incomprehensibility of the divinity and its intellect did not result in the denial of human understanding and emphasis on faith and grace, which is a line of thinking typically adopted by voluntarists. Bolingbroke is not voluntarist. Bolingbroke has an agnostic as well as a rational view of the world.

4 Providence and the Great Chain of Being

Why did Bolingbroke regard human beings as imperfect in this manner? This question is connected with his theory of providence.

The providence of God is not only for human beings, but also for other creatures. Providence is “general, and therefore, insufficient to answer all the purposes of his goodness and his justice, in an immense variety of contingent events, and with regard to the merits and demerits of every man.”⁴¹ Human beings engage in both good and evil behavior, the latter of which stems from human imperfection. However, God ordained this evil as a necessary part of the good world, which He created. From human vice, we receive the opportunity to improve and reflect on our imperfect behavior.⁴² “The wisdom of God, which you may call his goodness, has given man, by what is in his power, very

³⁹Ibid., vol. 3. p. 374.

⁴⁰Ibid., vol. 3, pp. 378–379.

⁴¹Ibid., vol. 5, p. 91.

⁴²Ibid., vol. 4, pp. 382–385.

ample means to make himself amends for that which is out of his power.”⁴³ In addition, Bolingbroke argues,

[t]ho God does not govern the world by particular providences ..., yet are we not, nor has mankind ever been, without God, and the evident marks of his providence, in the world ... national virtue and national vice have always produced national happiness and national misery in a due proportion, and are, by consequence, the great sanctions, as it is said above, of the law of nature. We shall find that these sanctions are sufficient, in terrorem [in order to frighten], to the collective bodies of men, and that the punishment of individuals is left to the discipline of those laws which every society makes for it's [sic] own sake.⁴⁴

Providence provides the general rule of human morality, but does not involve the particular intervention of God on human affairs. ‘The whole world, nay the whole universe, is filled with beings which are all connected in one immense design. The sensitive inhabitants of our globe, like the *dramatis personae*, have different characters, and are applied to different purposes of action in every scene ... the whole order and system of the drama would be disordered and spoiled, if any alteration was made in either.’⁴⁵ Here, Bolingbroke argues the intention of God for the ordering of the world.

In this regard, his view of the economy of species is of some hierarchical order of beings. Every creature has its nature and its law. Materials are purely passive, and dependent completely on their rule of movement. With regard to animals, for example,

[t]he first gleams of thought appear in our animal system, and with them the powers of willing, and of beginning motion. Thought improves, and the exercise of these powers grows more frequent and more considerable, as the system rises. As it rises, therefore, there is more room for contingency of events under general and invariable laws imposed on the whole kind, or on the particular species. But in no species is there so much room of this sort as in the human. Other animals seem to act more agreeably to the laws, each of his own nature ... which we call instinct. ...

But now in man, instinct does no more than point out the first rudiments of the law of his nature. Reason does, or should do the rest. Reason, instructed by experience, shews [= shows] the law, and the sanctions of it, which are as invariable and as uniform as the law; for in all the ages of the world, and among all the societies of men, the well-being or the ill-being of these societies, and therefore, of all mankind, has borne a constant proportion to the observation or neglect of

⁴³Ibid., vol. 4. p. 385.

⁴⁴Ibid., vol. 5, pp. 99–100.

⁴⁵Bolingbroke, “Fragments or Minutes,” vol. 4, pp. 379–380.

it ... This the Creator has done for us. What we shall do for ourselves he has left to the freedom of our elections; for free-will seems so essential to rational beings.⁴⁶

At first sight, Bolingbroke's vision seems similar to the traditional version of the Great Chain of Being, in which each creature constitutes a link in a hierarchical chain of beings from mineral and vegetable to animal, human, and God. Each creature has its own appropriate hierarchical space and role.⁴⁷ However, at the same time, there are differences: as mentioned above, Bolingbroke denies the idea that the divine intellect is similar to the human. This neo-Platonist idea, which is the traditional corollary of the idea of the Great Chain of Being, is advocated by Cudworth, whom Bolingbroke disagrees with completely. Bolingbroke's vision of the Great Chain of Being destroys the ascendant path from human to divine. As a result, he is forced to be satisfied with the self-sufficient order and mechanism of the secular world, which even the fallen state of human nature can comprehend by (flawed) reason.

Bolingbroke presupposes that not only reason but also passions constitute human nature.⁴⁸ Reason and passion are "both necessary in the human state; both useful when reason, both hurtful when passion governs. Between both stands the freedom of our will, which can determine either way: and from this constitution arises all that mixture of moral good and evil that we see and feel."⁴⁹

In addition to their morality, human beings create their own way of life. In this regard, agreeably to the divine providence, "men have been every where intent to procure to themselves all the physical comforts of life, and solicitous to defend themselves against all the physical evils."⁵⁰ Human beings cannot be the sole concern of the divine providence, which underpins the general nature and law of each species.

Bolingbroke moves forward the spontaneous order. He denies the existence of predestination, which is incompatible with his theory of free will. This theory constitutes not solely a struggle between virtue and vice; in it, free will also creates the conditions of human existence, qualified by time and place—that is society and its history. Although Bolingbroke also denies the role of particular providence, he does not deny that there is a general tendency in which national virtue or vice results in national welfare or misery. This vision of providence does not imagine a man or woman directly in the face of God, but instead

⁴⁶Ibid., vol. 5, pp. 101–102.

⁴⁷On the Great Chain of Being, see Lovejoy, A.O. *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936.

⁴⁸Ibid., vol. 5, p. 31.

⁴⁹Ibid., vol. 5, p. 31.

⁵⁰Ibid., vol. 5, p. 103.

human beings in the face of their national fate, as a collective body. In this sense, human beings create society and history.

5 Bolingbroke's history of human beings and society

In Bolingbroke's conception of providence, as mentioned above, human beings cannot attain complete knowledge of God and his plan, but they can attain knowledge of the human world and its law. This implies that human beings ought to concentrate on human affairs. So, what is God's original intention as the designer of human beings? At the bottom, God created humans as "social animals."

When God made man, he made a creature, the happiness of whose being depended on his sociability with animals of his own species. He made him therefore a social animal, an animal capable of feeling the immediate pleasure and advantage of society. The necessity of nature precedes that of artificial society; and the former, which is connected by instinct, prepares us for the latter, to which are determined by reason. We are made capable of both in their turns.⁵¹

In other words, Bolingbroke is arguing against Hobbes's conception of a state of nature. He says: "I do not believe neither, that such a state, as Hobbes assumes, ever did, or could exist, nor that men ever were in a state of absolute individuality at any time before the institution of civil society."⁵² However, he does not deny the basic idea of a state of nature; instead, he assumes,

[m]en never were, because they could never subsist, in a state of absolute individuality. Self-love, directed by instinct to mutual pleasure, made the union of man and woman. Self-love made that of parents and children. Self-love begat sociability; and reason, a principle of human nature, as well as instinct, improved it. Reason improved it, extended it to relations more remote, and united several families into one community, as instinct had united several individuals into one family. Reason performed this by help of experience. ... The natural desire leads us necessarily to the natural obligation. ... The law of nature, or of right reason, is the real original of all positive laws.⁵³

In this state of nature, "mankind was initially dispersed in families, which formed so many distinct societies under paternal government."⁵⁴ Thus, his view

⁵¹Ibid., vol. 4, pp. 41–42.

⁵²Ibid., vol. 4, p. 43.

⁵³Ibid., vol. 3, pp. 401–402.

⁵⁴Ibid., vol. 4, p. 48.

of the state of nature has its basis not solely in the Hobbesian self-interested individual or in human sociability, but in the association of self-interest and sociability. Bolingbroke presumes a universal moral quality and situation.

However, this state did not last:

The state of mankind altered extremely when families had been long separated, whatever the cause of separation was; and when the natural bands were not only loosened, but lost and forgot in the course of generations ... when there was no authority to interpose between different people ... as paternal authority had done, where different members of the same family were alone concerned; then mutual injuries became more frequent, and their consequences more fatal.

As fast as the distribution of mankind into families, and as paternal government ceased, men went out of a natural into a political state. The former was so little what it has been represented, a state of individuality, that individuality could never be properly ascribed to creatures born in society, and members of it as soon as born. Individuality belongs to communities, not to persons. Families might be conceived as individuals, tho not men, in the state of nature: and civil societies much more so in the political state.⁵⁵

The idea that mutual assistance between individuals should produce a family and society is perhaps inspired by Pufendorf. For Pufendorf and Hutcheson, when they argued about mankind's original rights, there has existed sociability in the state of nature. Bolingbroke emphasizes obligation, and in this respect cannot be seen as being in the natural rights tradition. What is original in Bolingbroke is the presupposition that natural sociability implies natural non-individuality, and that people in the state of nature should be considered not as individuals but as members of a family. Furthermore, the state of nature ended when the paternal representation of the entire family no longer sufficed to meet social needs. Thus, there arose the separation of individuals in society.

In addition, Bolingbroke here directly criticizes the Lockean idea of the state of nature. "That all men are born to be free, is undoubtedly true; and therefore I think that they never were in such a state of nature as LOCKE assumes. His state of perfect freedom, so he calls it, would have been a state of war and violence."⁵⁶

In the politicized, individualistic state outlined by Bolingbroke, self-love has new implications. "Societies become in all respects individuals, that is, they have no regard to others except relatively to themselves; and self-love, that promoted union among men, promotes discord among them."⁵⁷ This narrative, in which natural sociability degenerates into egoistic unsociability in the political

⁵⁵Ibid., vol. 4, p. 52.

⁵⁶Ibid., vol. 4, p. 68.

⁵⁷Ibid., vol. 4, p. 53.

state, might be seen as a precursor of Rousseau; however, Bolingbroke sees this unhappy discord among individuals as the cause of the formation of the political society.⁵⁸

In addition, Bolingbroke's vision of human sociability is different from the one advocated by Shaftesbury and Hutcheson. Bolingbroke dismisses the position of the advocates of 'moral sense, that is, an instinct by which they distinguish what is morally good from what is morally evil' (though he did not mention their names, he probably meant Shaftesbury and Hutcheson), because 'these men pretend to consult the dictates of right reason, they leave reason no rule to go by. Every man assumes that his own is right. ...'⁵⁹ This position leads them to 'bid fair to be enthusiasts in ethics, and to make natural religion as ridiculous.'⁶⁰ Due to the potential for human unsociability in political society, we need some rule of law in addition to the use of reason.

Political society does not destroy natural sociability completely, and has a kind of mechanism to compensate for unsociability:

We are designed to be social, not solitary, creatures. Mutual wants unite us: and natural benevolence and political order, on which our happiness depends, are founded in them. This is the law of our nature; and tho every man is not able for different reasons to discern it, or discerning it to apply it, yet so many are able to do this, that they serve as guides to the rest. The rest submit, for the advantages they find in this submission. They learn by experience that servitude to law is real liberty; and that the regulation of pleasure is real happiness.⁶¹

Therefore, Bolingbroke's version of the Great Chain of Being in human affairs remains hierarchical. Human beings are happy when they conform to the conditions of their society, and when they are part of a self-sufficient society. According to Bolingbroke, human beings are considered not as individual existences but as parts of the self-sufficient whole, without which the individual could not survive.

6 Conclusion

Bolingbroke's religious thought is based on the assumption of the impossibility of human beings attaining direct knowledge of God or his attributes. This agnostic vision results in the idea that humans should be content with the knowledge they can attain of the secular world.

⁵⁸Ibid., vol. 4, p. 65.

⁵⁹Ibid., vol. 4, p. 15.

⁶⁰Ibid., vol. 4, p. 16.

⁶¹Ibid., vol. 4, pp. 388–389.

In addition, Bolingbroke believes that God created the world rationally and that it is understandable on the basis of some general principles that human reason can discover. Thus, his vision of the world remains deistic. This combination of agnosticism and deism is tantamount to the idea that, while human beings can identify the general nature and laws of human affairs by reason, in contrast—and contradicting the view of the deists—we cannot use reason to prove the truth or validity of a priori knowledge of God. Therefore, human beings should concentrate on investigating the secular world. This principle is very much in keeping with the spirit of the Enlightenment.

However, Bolingbroke is not completely aligned with the Enlightenment thinkers. He remains a proponent of hierarchical society, which Hume and Smith denied. Unlike them, Bolingbroke sustains the idea of a universal morality. However, in contrast with Kant, he builds it not from abstract principles, but from the alleged historical past. This ambivalent character of Bolingbroke's thought is perhaps appropriate to the religious thought of the transition period from deism to the Enlightenment; his agnostic-rational view of the world can usefully be seen as precursing the assumptions of the Enlightenment thinkers.