A DIALOGUE ON THE BEST FORM OF GOVERNMENT

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BY THE RIGHT HONORABLE

SIR GEORGE CORNEWALL LEWIS,

BART., M.P.

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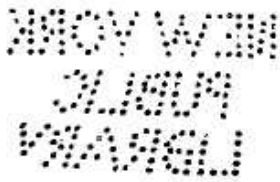

PREFACE.

FROM the birth of political speculation down to a recent period, treatises on politics generally assumed the character of enquiries into the perfect state, or into the best form of government. This was the exclusive object of the Republic of Plato. Even the Politics of Aristotle, though they dealt more extensively with fact than the Platonic dialogue, aimed at determining the best form of government. Theophrastus wrote a treatise *περὶ τῆς ἀρίστης πολιτείας*. Cicero himself describes his Dialogue *de Republicâ* as an enquiry "de optimo reipublicæ statu." The imaginary commonwealths, and political romances, which were a favourite mode of composition in the 16th, the 17th, and even in the 18th century, all professed to discover the perfect state:* and finally Mr. James Mill, in his article on Government, in the 'Ency-

* An enumeration and full account of the works of this class is given in the comprehensive Treatise of Professor Mohl, *Geschichte und Literatur der Staatswissenschaften* (Erlangen, 1855), vol. i. pp. 167–214.

clopædia Britannica,' undertook to demonstrate, by an abstract and universal argument, that democracy is the best form of government.

Writings of this class have of late years become rare, and in fact have nearly disappeared. Their discontinuance has been owing to a prevalent conviction of their inutility. It has been thought (in the words of Lord Bacon) that the philosophical schemes of ideal commonwealths "are as the stars, which give little light, because they are so high."* Yet forms of government have not ceased to be important: they still exercise an extensive influence upon the happiness of nations; not only do they affect the interests, but they arouse the passions of mankind, and enlist large bodies of fanatical partizans under their respective banners.

It has therefore seemed to me that a compact statement of the principal arguments for and against each form of government would be suited to the wants of readers of the present generation. As the best mode of accomplishing this object, I have selected the dialogue form, which affords facilities for bringing on the stage the advocates of conflicting opinions, without any attempt at a decision, or at leading the reader to a dogmatic result.

When, after the researches of a long series of

* *Advancement of Learning*, b. 2, c. 23, § 44.

philosophers, a science has reached a fixed and established position, the dialogue would be a form wholly unsuited to its treatment. No scientific writer would now think of exhibiting the elements of astronomy, or of mechanics, or of chemistry, in the shape of a controversy between different interlocutors. But when philosophy was still making its first efforts for the discovery of truth, Plato embodied all his speculations in the form of dialogues; and this mode of composition always remained a favourite one among the ancients, even when the reasons for its use had been greatly weakened. Cicero composed nearly all his philosophical works in the dialogue form, and Tacitus used it for his discourse on the causes of the decay of eloquence. Modern writers have shown less fondness for this mode of treating a subject; but Berkeley thought that the state of metaphysical science in his time afforded a fit opening for his dialogue of the Minute Philosopher. Fontenelle employed the same method for investigating the question of the Plurality of Worlds; and a distinguished writer of our own time has fitly treated this indeterminate problem in the same form. Southey and other more recent authors have likewise used the dialogue as a vehicle for promulgating miscellaneous opinions on political and social subjects.

The philosophical dialogue possesses peculiar

advantages for presenting, distinctly, and in a small compass, the opposite arguments on an unsettled question. It is neither a debate nor a conversation. It has not the long speeches of the one, or the incoherent, rambling, and extemporaneous character of the other. It enjoys the benefit of the dramatic style, and it enables conflicting arguments to be put forward with an appearance of conviction on each side.

I have supposed the dialogue to take place in our own time and country, between four Englishmen, belonging to the educated class. My object has been to conceive each of the three recognized forms, Monarchy, Aristocracy, and Democracy, as represented by a sincere partizan, and to attribute to him such arguments as a judicious advocate might properly use. I have attempted, in succession, to place each government in the light in which it would be regarded by an enthusiastic admirer, and to suggest all the strongest objections to the other governments which the advocates of each would naturally urge. My aim has been to conduct the controversy in such a manner as to represent the strength of each case; but I have not endeavoured to exhaust the subject. A dialogue is not fitted for systematic instruction, or for strict scientific treatment.

After this explanation of the plan of the composition, it is scarcely necessary for me to say that

I do not identify myself with any one of the interlocutors, or indeed render myself responsible for any of the arguments used in the dialogue. I may remark, however, that I have not in any instance knowingly attributed to any of the interlocutors merely logical fallacies; fallacies which turn upon verbal or formal sophisms, and which are absolutely destitute of proving force. The arguments which I have put in their mouths seemed to me to be valid as far as they go; though they may be overborne by other more powerful arguments. It is a controversy consisting of a debtor and creditor account; the difficulty lies in striking the balance fairly. The weights in one scale may be less heavy than the weights in the other scale, but they are nevertheless weights. Such is the nature of nearly all moral and political problems. Where the discussion is conducted on both sides by competent disputants, there are almost always valid arguments in favour of each of two opposite opinions. The difficulty is to determine which of two sets of valid arguments preponderates.

London, December, 1862.