

**A LECTURE ON NATIONAL  
EDUCATION: DELIVERED  
AT THE ATHENAEUM,  
PLYMOUTH, JANUARY, 1844**

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**J. N. BENNETT**

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It is right to state that portions of the historical matter in pages 30, 31, and 32—part of the paragraphs, pages 37 and 38—and many of the quotations from the Report of the Children's Employment Commissioners, were not read at length before the Institution; the limited hour allowed by the Rules of the Society for the delivery of the Lecture not permitting its enlargement by their introduction.

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## LECTURE.

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THE PROSPECTUS.—*The fundamental rights and duties of civil Government; the general welfare of Society its final object; the low moral condition of large masses of the laboring population; such a condition highly detrimental to the general welfare. —As to the remedy for the evil.—The improvement of the physical condition of the poor, defective as a remedy; Education of the intellect only also insufficient; the moral properties alone present a fitting channel by which to reach the evil; Education of the moral powers, or moral training, the effective remedy.—The claimants to administer National Education. First, the parental claim; second, the claim of the voluntary principle; third, the claim of the State; the latter asserted: the two former, under present circumstances, denied.—The State system should be compulsory. Objections met—first, civil liberty, its nature and objects, a compulsory system of Education not prejudicial to it; the law of England on that subject, and on the limits of parental power; second, religious liberty, its nature and objects, the compulsory principle not prejudicial to it.—The criminality of the State in neglecting to establish a system of National Education asserted, and its right to inflict the penalties of the criminal code on the victims of that neglect, called in question. This Lecture will be mainly confined to the exposition of first principles.*

MR. PRESIDENT AND GENTLEMEN,

It forms a proposition in political philosophy, that upon the original constitution of Society, or by subsequent general acquiescence, the individuals composing a given Community, surrender to one, or more members of that Community, certain of their absolute rights, to be exercised by those in whose favor

the delegation is made, for the general good of the entire body;—and in order to ensure by that arrangement a larger amount of public happiness than would otherwise be attainable. The rights thus delegated are sovereign rights—they form the foundation of Government; their surrender vests in the favored body the privilege of governing the rest of the Community, and establishes at once within the same Society the two distinct classes of the Governors, and the Governed; the one class consisting of those select Executors of the regulations by which the great object of the original compact is sought to be attained—the other, consisting of the entire assemblage of the Community, including, in their individual capacities, the members of the first class. Each class is distinguished by a peculiar name, characteristic of the extent of the surrender of rights which the particular Community has made, and varies in its political construction, according to temper, genius, and national character, by nice and subtle gradations, from the form in which nearly all the rights, with which Man is invested by Nature, are committed to others for administration, to that other, and more dignified, condition, in which the surrender has been most sparingly and suspiciously granted; the person or class holding the delegated rights, being variously styled, the Monarch—the Government—the State; and the Community, the Subjects, or People,—whilst the laws and the organised institutions, by which they are carried into effect, are grouped together in description under the general title of the Constitution. Reason and experience have fully demonstrated that so many are the evils, and so few the benefits resulting to mankind from a state of natural and lawless liberty, where the evil are unrestrained, and the good unprotected, that any one of the modifications of civil Government within the wide range before us, is preferable to none at all; whilst the best form is that which satisfies the largest portion of man's social wants, concurrently with the preservation of the greatest amount of his natural rights—and as the end proposed by the Community, in making the delegation supposed, is an end common to both Government and People, and to the furtherance of which both parties stand impliedly pledged; so, upon the completion of the arrangement, they become bound



to each other in reciprocal obligations. The granters of the surrendered rights, and the depositaries of these rights, at once stand in mutual relations to each other, whence arises a common trust or confidence between them. Each party possesses rights, and is charged with duties. The duties of the State being found in its obligation to advance the welfare of the Community, by the use of all the means placed by the Community in its hands—its rights will be found in those same means—and its powers should be commensurate with its rights. The duties and rights of the People are of a corresponding nature—their duties are to submit to the claims of the State, to the extent of the limits assigned it—their rights, to claim protection from the State in the exercise of that portion of their natural liberty with which they have not parted. The first, and leading right of every Government, is that of self-preservation; the Community has established it generally after great pains and many struggles, and invested it with extensive privileges, in order that it may form their permanent guard and protection; it has consequently received sufficient power to enable it to perpetuate its existence, and to preserve its integrity. Wilfully to compass serious detriment to the persons who represent the Government, or the organized body which forms the Constitution, is High Treason against the State; and for the State knowingly to permit the infliction on itself of a wound, which will damage its operations, and impair its efficiency, is a betrayal of the most sacred part of the trust confided to its care. Again, its first duty to the People, is to protect them from the wilful injuries of the evil disposed—but both of the previous duties—the duty of the State to itself to secure its own preservation, and the duty to protect the peaceable and orderly from the assaults of the vicious are negative duties, and trifling in amount of importance, when compared with its final and absorbing obligation,—to advance by all lawful—that is, by all delegated means, the welfare of the entire Community. Its self-preservation is only valuable, as its spirit and energies are directed to this end. Its care and watchfulness over its own integrity, and its activity in repressing outrage and crime, receive their most indisputable merit in the exhibition of a corresponding promptness to cultivate the

moral and physical welfare of the Communities committed to its care; to elevate the national character, and to develop the sources of civilization. In proportion as civil Government exercises with vigour the powers committed to it, and the people in their turn lend their voluntary submission to its authority, and by their joint agency, the great ends of the common agreement are worked out, in that same proportion does each party faithfully discharge its trust; and in proportion as either party recedes from this standard of duty, is the public welfare compromised.

I am quite sensible of the facility with which propositions such as these may be laid down, and of the general acquiescence with which they may be received. Up to the present point we may have proceeded in the enunciation of these general principles in perfect agreement and harmony. The real difficulties begin when, in the course of the investigation, the time arrives for applying them to the practical occasions of Society—when we come to discriminate between public duty and private right—between the powers of Government and the rights of individuals—between the limits of order on the one hand, and those of liberty on the other—between, according to our opening position, the rights surrendered and the rights retained. Instead of encumbering myself, however, with needless hypotheses, I shall confine myself to the isolated case which forms the subject of the present paper, and—

Assuming the existence of moral evil, and that those fruitful sources of human depravity—ignorance of social duties, and ignorance of moral responsibility, are two of its symptoms, or forms of existence, I shall proceed to shew that they prevail in vast intensity throughout large masses of our laboring population; that moral training is their only remedy, or a large and essential part of their only remedy; that as, on the principles before expounded, the leading object of civil Government is the promotion of the general happiness of its subject People, its adoption of the means calculated to remove or diminish such serious obstacles to their welfare is an obvious duty; that this duty is to some extent *peculiar* to the State, because no other power is adequate to enforce the universal adoption of the necessary remedy—and *imperative*, because the evils now affecting us are great and imminent; that

the due exercise of the State's power will not affect private rights, because it will be only applied where those rights are either abused or in abeyance; and finally, that the neglect of this imperative duty involves the State in heavy crimes.

The rapidity with which the Manufacturing industry of this Country has extended itself, and, as its corresponding result, the dense peopling of the districts most under its influence, constitute a modern wonder, which, whether presenting itself to our notice in its commercial, financial, physical, or moral aspect, has excited hopes and apprehensions of no ordinary kind. Regarded in its moral aspect (in which alone I now propose to consider it) it has arrested the attention of Philosophers,\* excited the sympathies of Philanthropists, and furnished materials even for the pens of Novelists, and Poets.—Talented and benevolent men, amongst whom Dr. Chalmers stands pre-eminent, and Lord Ashley is not unknown, have devoted themselves to the task of exposing the moral maladies affecting a large part of the population of our Manufacturing, and especially our Mining districts—accounts, sometimes exaggerated, but more frequently true, have found their way in Society, by which masses of men, treading the soil of our native land and inhabiting our cities, have been represented as realizing all the peculiarities of barbarous and even of savage life. Whilst, it has been said, national wealth has increased prodigiously, and the art been discovered of the profitable application of unbounded capital, the Artizan, whose labor forms the foundation of all wealth, is depressed to the lowest state—the minimum of existence; thousands are confined in miserable hovels, literally unable to go abroad for want of necessary raiment; vast numbers live in cellars and vaults, their moral degradation being unparalleled, and complete—and the horrors of real life have been exhibited in colors far deeper than imagination has ever presumed to paint. At length Parliament, acted on by various stimulants, began a few years since to direct its attention to the new phenomenon, and, amongst other matters of national solicitude affecting the labouring classes, the condition, physical and moral, of the children

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\* See note A, Appendix.