

SUMMARY OF PRINCIPLES

William Godwin

Table of Contents

<u>SUMMARY OF PRINCIPLES</u>	1
<u>William Godwin</u>	2
<u>I</u>	3
<u>II</u>	4
<u>III</u>	5
<u>IV</u>	6
<u>V</u>	7
<u>VI</u>	8
<u>VII</u>	9
<u>VIII</u>	10

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- I.
- II.
- III.
- IV.
- V.
- VI.
- VII.
- VIII.

The reader who would form a just estimate of the reasonings of these volumes, cannot perhaps proceed more judiciously, than by examining for himself the truth of these principles, and the support they afford to the various inferences interspersed through the work.

SUMMARY OF PRINCIPLES

I.

The true object of moral and political disquisition, is pleasure or happiness.

The primary, or earliest class of human pleasures, is the pleasures of the external senses.

In addition to these, man is susceptible of certain secondary pleasures, as the pleasures of intellectual feeling, the pleasures of sympathy, and the pleasures of self–approbation.

The secondary pleasures are probably more exquisite than the primary:

Or, at least,

The most desirable state of man, is that, in which he has access to these sources of pleasure, and is in possession of a happiness the most varied and uninterrupted.

This state is a state of high civilization.

SUMMARY OF PRINCIPLES

II.

The most desirable condition of the human species, is a state of society.

The injustice and violence of men in a state of society, produced the demand for government.

Government, as it was forced upon mankind by their vices, so has it commonly been the creature of their ignorance and mistake.

Government was intended to suppress injustice, but it offers new occasions and temptations for the commission of it.

By concentrating the force of the community, it gives occasion to wild projects of calamity, to oppression, despotism, war, and conquest.

By perpetuating and aggravating the inequality of property, it fosters many injurious passions, and excites men to the practice of robbery and fraud.

Government was intended to suppress injustice, but its effect has been to embody and perpetuate it.

SUMMARY OF PRINCIPLES

III.

The immediate object of government, is security.

The means employed by government, is restriction, an abridgement of individual independence.

The pleasures of self–approbation, together with the right cultivation of all our pleasures, require individual independence.

Without independence men cannot become either wise, useful, or happy.

Consequently, the most desirable state of mankind, is that which maintains general security, with the smallest [e]ncroachment upon individual independence.

SUMMARY OF PRINCIPLES

IV.

The true standard of the conduct of one man towards another is justice.

Justice is a principle which proposes to itself the production of the greatest sum of pleasure or happiness.

Justice requires that I should put myself in the place of an impartial spectator of human concerns, and divest myself of retrospect to my own predilections.

Justice is a rule of the utmost universality, and prescribes a specific mode of proceeding, in all affairs by which the happiness of human beings may be affected.

SUMMARY OF PRINCIPLES

V.

Duty is that mode of action, which constitutes the best application of the capacity of the individual, to the general advantage.

Right is the claim of the individual, to his share of the benefit arising from his neighbors' discharge of their several duties.

The claim of the individual, is either to the exertion or the forbearance of his neighbors.

The exertions of men in society should ordinarily be trusted to their discretion; their forbearance, in certain cases, is a point of more pressing necessity, and is the direct province of political superintendence, or government.

SUMMARY OF PRINCIPLES

VI.

The voluntary actions of men are under the direction of their feelings.

Reason is not an independent principle, and has no tendency to excite us to action; in a practical view, it is merely a comparison and balancing of different feelings.

Reason, though it cannot excite us to action, is calculated to regulate our conduct, according to the comparative worth it ascribes to different excitements.

It is to the improvements of reason therefore, that we are to look for the improvement of our social condition.

SUMMARY OF PRINCIPLES

VII.

Reason depends for its clearness and strength upon the cultivation of knowledge.

The extent of our progress in the cultivation of knowledge is unlimited:

Hence it follows,

1. That human inventions, and the modes of social existence, are susceptible to perpetual improvement.
2. That institutions calculated to give perpetuity to any particular mode of thinking, or condition of existence, are pernicious.

SUMMARY OF PRINCIPLES

VIII.

The pleasures of intellectual feeling, and the pleasures of self–approbation, together with the right cultivation of all our pleasures, are connected with soundness of understanding.

Soundness of understanding is inconsistent with prejudice: consequently, as few falsehoods as possible, either speculative or practical, should be fostered among mankind.

Soundness of understanding is connected with freedom of enquiry: consequently, opinion should, as far as public security will admit, be exempt from restraint.

Soundness of understanding is connected with simplicity of manners, and leisure for intellectual cultivation: consequently, a distribution of property extremely unequal, is adverse to the most desirable state of man.