CHAPTER 4

The Polite Anarchist

This chapter addresses Godwin’s thought during the 1790s. Its aim is to draw a link between Godwin’s increasing deployment of the idiom of politeness from the mid-decade onward and his enduring commitment to antiauthoritarianism. It argues that the intersection between politeness and anarchism in his thought is most clearly evident in his conception of a discursive form of liberty based around the ideal of polite conversation that can be located within Godwin's underlying anarchical vision of a community of free and self-determining individuals.

Godwin’s harnessing of politeness in the service of his antiauthoritarian agenda can be understood in two main ways. First, it illustrated his increasing recognition of the need for mitigating the possibility of endemic conflict that would ensue under conditions of unrestrained anarchy as political authority is increasingly attenuated and decentralized. Second, it acted as an antihegemonic mode of social interaction that tied a new conception of liberty to his consistent and underlying defense of radical decentralization. Thus, politeness both restrained and sustained anarchy: it minimized social conflict while, at the same time, promoting individual liberty within an anarchical social milieu, unmediated by any higher coercive agency.

As politeness became a preferred vehicle for public-enlightened reform, Godwin’s conception of social interaction became no less anarchistic in its strong antiauthoritarianism. In this regard, the shift can also be understood in terms of a departure from, what may be termed, a rationalist to a skeptical mode of antiauthoritarianism in Godwin’s thought. The focus on politeness can thus be seen as reflective of the broader adaptive and revisionist strands in Godwin’s thinking in the years following the original publication of Political Justice in 1793.
The chapter makes the following five related claims concerning Godwin’s changing conception of social interaction under anarchy. First, following the original publication of Political Justice, Godwin’s antiauthoritarianism remained a central and consistent aspect of his political philosophy and continued to underpin some of the intellectual tensions in his thought. Second, his increasing use of the language of politeness as a cultural mode of reformist political critique after the mid-1790s represents an attempt at retaining this antiauthoritarian commitment, rather than departing from it: in short, Godwin appropriated politeness in the service of his antiauthoritarian political agenda. Third, this can be understood in terms of his changing conception of liberty that he increasingly situated in the realm of discursive social relations in the form of polite conversation as a model for public deliberation. Fourth, one strand of the civic humanist tradition exemplified by Lawrence Klein’s reading of the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, which ties liberty to politeness, can elucidate this shift to a polite form of discursive liberty in Godwin’s thought. Here, politeness can be seen as an ideological bulwark to liberty rather than simply a means of social exclusion or a form of dissimulation as radicals of the period had more commonly characterized it. Finally, the elitism associated with the idiom of politeness, along with Godwin’s more general move toward recognizing the centrality of “private affections,” reflects Godwin’s growing acknowledgment of the actual prospects for radical reform and a departure from his former stringent moralism. This is also shown in his changing views on the related issues of property, commerce, and luxury.

The chapter is in three parts. The first part sets out, what I have termed, the rationalist mode of Godwin’s antiauthoritarian thought. It begins by looking at Godwin’s ideas on virtue and conversation in the first edition of Political Justice, illustrating the way his primitive and frugal conception of virtue accords with his wider optimistic rationalism as foundations of his radical transformative project at this time. It also focuses on his view of public discussion as the complement to individual private judgment and, in so doing, points to the centrality of conversation as a vehicle for reform, albeit one that itself, I will argue, was subject to change.

Parts two and three of the chapter address the skeptical shift in Godwin’s antiauthoritarian thought and identify it with his deployment of politeness. The second part traces his changing conception of virtue from a primitive to a polite notion, on the one hand, and the increasing emphasis he accords to politeness as the locus of a discursive form of liberty, on the other, particularly in The Enquirer (1797) and also in later editions of Political Justice (1796, 1798). It draws on Klein’s reading of Shaftesbury to elucidate this shift to politeness in Godwin’s thought as representing the ideological pursuit of a radical form of liberty.
The third part investigates the significance of three wider personal contexts—cultural, political, and social—for the development of a growing gradualism and realism in Godwin’s thought. These developments can be seen as supplementing the central argument regarding Godwin’s shift to politeness as a manifestation of an increased skepticism in his thought. The first concerns his literary and cultural life and output. The second concerns the more general political context I approach mainly through Godwin’s two significant direct “political” interventions during this period, his *Cursory Strictures* (1794) and *Considerations* (1795). The third focuses on the influence of Dissenting social circles on Godwin that accentuated the increasingly intellectually refined, cultivated, commercial, and conversational dimensions of his reformist project. This provides a more sophisticated and variegated picture of the Dissenting influence on Godwin than one simply of a solemn army of proponents of sincerity.

This interpretation of Godwin’s thought suggests that he came to recognize that the rules of engagement for sustaining social intercourse under anarchical conditions bring with them the recognition that the context of anarchy militates against radical institutional reform and is more suited to a gradual process of public enlightenment. Moreover, it intimated that, for liberty to be sustained under such conditions, there must exist a framework for disagreement that is built into the very conventions that sustain social relations.

**The Empire of Truth**

In *The Spirit of the Age* (1825), William Hazlitt wrote of the measure of Godwin’s immediate impact on publishing *Political Justice*:

No one was more talked of, more looked up to, more sought after, and, wherever liberty, truth, justice was the theme, his name was not far off... No work in our time gave such a blow to the philosophical mind of the country as the celebrated *Enquiry concerning Political Justice*. Tom Paine was considered for the time as a Tom Fool to him, Paley an old woman, Edmund Burke a flashy sophist.

Notwithstanding Hazlitt’s impassioned words, Godwin’s detached, philosophical treatise appeared to sit rather awkwardly in its influence alongside the powerful rhetorical eloquence of Burke’s *Reflections* and the provocative mass appeal of Paine’s *Rights of Man*. Godwin’s was neither a direct contribution to the pamphlet debate on France nor a work of seductive prose. It was *Political Justice*, nonetheless, that came to epitomize the political logic of
the widely held belief in the inexorable ascendancy of reason over passion. In it, Godwin set out a vision of a community of rational and autonomous individuals free from the despotism of government that in many ways became the blueprint for modern philosophical anarchism.

Political Justice

Godwin began work on *Political Justice* in September 1791 and completed it in December 1792. It was published two months later in a highly charged political environment, soon after Britain entered war with France and the regicide of Louis XVI in the previous month. From the outset, it was conceived by him in ambitious and detached terms, as a way of redressing some of the limitations of Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws*. “I suggested to Robinson the bookseller,” he wrote, “the idea of composing a treatise on Political Principles…my original conception proceeded on a feeling of the imperfections and errors of Montesquieu, and a desire of supplying a less faulty work.” Despite this initial impetus, Godwin, like many of his contemporaries, imbibed the postrevolutionary climate of optimism that had gripped radical circles in Britain and his work became at once both intimately implicated in and, in its abstract disposition, set apart from, the ensuing tumult of the decade.

With echoes of the land of the Houyhnhmns in Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, the projected community that Godwin envisaged reflected the main principles he was propounding. Foremost among them were a belief in progress; in the perfectibility of human beings; in universal rationality; and in the omnipotence of truth. These four principles represented, in effect, the apotheosis of Enlightenment faith in reason as a panacea. They can be understood as underpinning the “rationalist” account of Godwin’s antiauthoritarian thought, which, as I shall argue in the following parts of this chapter, he was to increasingly depart from.

Godwin described perfectibility as “one of the most unequivocal characteristics of the human species.” This aspect of his work in particular attracted the ridicule of many of his critics and, by the end of the century, it played a fatal part in rendering his reputation as obscure and damaged as it had once been famed and respected. In one memorable passage where he follows the principle to absurd and fanciful conclusions this reception seems not entirely surprising. Through right reason and the ineluctable train of progress of truth over error, he remarked, human beings would eventually learn to overcome sleep and even death.

For Godwin, however, *Political Justice* was far from being simply a utopian flight of fancy. It was an incipient program of action. To achieve this,
he set out to create an inextricable link between truth and morality: where rational agents discover truth and necessarily act according to its imperatives. This extends most forcefully to his critique of government. Thus, he asserted, “all vice is nothing more than error and mistake reduced into practice, and adopted as the principle of our conduct,” and that government served to simply give “substance and permanence to our errors.” Reason, he believed, was, perforce, to throw light on this inherently pernicious institution and displace it with the “empire of truth.” To behave immorally was simply to err from the path to which reason led as a consequence, primarily, of the distortions that emanated from the institution of government.

Godwin’s criticism of government and traditional forms of institutional authority rested on their constraining individual moral and intellectual improvement and autonomy of action: “By its very nature political institution has a tendency to suspend the elasticity, and put an end to the advancement of mind.” It was this preoccupation with the moral and intellectual development of the individual that also underpinned his core belief in the principle of private judgment he described as “a doctrine so unspeakably beautiful.”

The influence of Godwin’s Dissenting background and education played a pivotal role in his subsequent defense of private judgment, although, as shall be discussed later, it also had more ambiguous implications on the development of his thought. At an early age he became a pupil of the Dissenting minister, Samuel Newton, and was introduced to the harsh rationalism of Sandemanian principles. As Don Locke has described, “the sect’s most distinctive tenet was that belief in God must be a matter of wholly intellectual assent, unpolluted by any element of emotion or unreasoned faith.” From the outset, therefore, Godwin had melded into his belief in private judgment an extreme and uncompromising view of reason and, in the austere system of rigid Calvinism, a stoic attitude toward the feelings or sentiment. His continued adherence to the primacy of private judgment, if not the radical Calvinism of Robert Sandeman, was perpetuated through his studies at Hoxton Academy he attended from 1773 to 1778. As a Dissenter, excluded from attending the national universities, he studied at Hoxton, one of the country’s leading academic institutions, under the tutorship of Andrew Kippis and Abraham Rees, prominent thinkers of the English Enlightenment. Hoxton imbued Godwin with a liberality and deep commitment to independent enquiry that was to resurface in the tenor of Political Justice. In it, a virtuous disposition, Godwin argued, was “principally generated by the uncontrolled exercise of private judgment and the rigid conformity of every man to the dictates of his conscience.”

The doctrine of private judgment also attached to Godwin’s related commitment to individual independence and autonomy in relation to the
community at large. At this stage in the trajectory of his political thought, and despite his valorization of independent thinking, Godwin ultimately valued simplicity over sophistication. His anarchist vision was rather more pastoral than urbane, echoing the sentiments conveyed in his novel, *Imogen*, almost a decade earlier.\(^\text{16}\) This is also borne out in his views on the vexed question of property and the related issues of luxury and commerce.\(^\text{17}\)

The subsequent development of these views, manifested in the transmuted conception of liberty in Godwin’s thought I trace later in this chapter, can also be elucidated with reference to alternate interpretations of virtue in the civic humanist tradition I discussed in Chapter 3. This is particularly useful as it underscores Godwin’s consistent antiauthoritarianism in spite of his changing conception of the nature of liberty. Thus, at this stage of his intellectual development—in, what I have termed, the rationalist account of his antiauthoritarian thought—Godwin’s views can be seen to embody elements resembling the dominant republican conception of civic virtue in which individual autonomy is expressed in simple, primitive, and frugal terms. This can help to elucidate the subsequent shift toward politeness in his thought with reference to a changing conception of political virtue, understood as polite virtue, in the republican tradition, which is expressed in alternative, more refined, terms and tied to manners.

This is a development I will take up later in the chapter that draws on Klein’s interpretation of Shaftesbury as a “polite” civic humanist and takes Claeys’s interpretation of the evolution of Godwin’s thought as its point of departure. As Claeys has argued,

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\text{Godwin’s development thus reflects in microcosm that process which J. G. A. Pocock has characterised as one of the more important movements in eighteenth-century political thought generally, the supplanting of notions of republican political virtue and the common good by politeness as a means of civilizing the passions of and providing for a sense of collective endeavour in commercial society.}^\text{18}
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In both accounts of republican virtue, as in both accounts of liberty in my interpretation of Godwin’s thought in this chapter, a publicly oriented and participatory commitment to individual liberty remain consistent. My principal intention is thus to draw on interpretive variations of the conception of virtue within civic humanism as a heuristic tool in order to chart the evolving treatment of liberty in Godwin’s thought in light of his consistent antiauthoritarianism, rather than as a way of situating Godwin within the tradition.

In Book V of *Political Justice*, “Of Legislative and Executive Power,” Godwin considered three forms of government: monarchy, aristocracy, and
democracy. In Chapter II, “Of Education, the Education of a Prince,” his criticisms of the life of a prince can be linked to his views on luxury and his frugal conception of virtue. On the latter, while he acknowledged that adversity was not necessary for virtue, he insisted that “it is nevertheless certain that luxury and wealth have the most fatal effects in distorting it.” He set up a typical opposition between virtue as fortitude and the “effeminate” vices of luxury commenting with condescension that “he that loves sensuality or ostentation better than virtue, may be entitled to our pity” and went on to contrast “the artificial methods of false refinement” with “the plain and unornamented road of benevolence.”

Godwin saw the existing system of property as stifling the progression of political justice and pointed to the need for greater equality. In the following passage he brought together this need with a critique of luxury:

> It is high time that we should lay aside the very names of justice and virtue, or that we should acknowledge that they do not authorize us to accumulate luxuries upon ourselves, while we see others in want of the indispensable means of improvement and happiness.

Luxury and virtue were thus seen to be incompatible. Attitudes toward luxury had underpinned much eighteenth-century political argumentation and were articulated in the defense of contending ideological positions. As Christopher Berry has noted, “the eighteenth-century was the period when the debate as to the meaning and value-laden status of luxury came into prominence . . . It is important testimony to the salience and implicit seriousness of this debate that it was taken up and pursued throughout the world of letters.” Through his elaboration of the coincidence of public benefits with private vices, Bernard Mandeville was the early century’s most important proponent of luxury he defined as “everything not immediately necessary to make Man subsist as he is a living Creature.” Mandeville constructed a defense of luxury against frugality and linked it to the flourishing of the arts, sciences, and material civilization. For its detractors, however, luxury became implicated in the corrupting effects of credit and commerce on political virtue. The assumption that underlay such negative attitudes was the resultant caprice and uncertainty that would ensue. As Berry has noted, “without the presence of a stable foundation for virtuous activity, society, shorn of the bearings needed to direct the public good, would be cast adrift on the sea of contingency that an economy based on commerce and credit represents.”

Godwin would have been aware of the implicit position he was taking when treating the subject in drawing attention to the corruptive effects of
luxury for the public good. For him, luxury was the product of the inequality of property and had a pernicious effect on the virtuous simplicity he was advocating. But simplicity could also be construed as being one step away from savagery and it was the primitivism that this conception of virtue entailed that was to pose a burden on Godwin’s increasing receptivity, later in the decade, to the importance of high culture in the promulgation of liberty. This was particularly arresting in light of the associations of luxury with progress and civilization.  

Calls for equality were met by a volley of loyalist rhetoric that painted an alarmist picture of immanent and widespread “levelling.” This was most often directed toward Paine’s *Rights of Man* but was also a more general commonplace of the loyalist propaganda of the period against the purported threat of revolutionary radicalism to the sanctity of private property, a potent symbol of English liberty. Godwin had framed the first edition of *Political Justice* in the language of duties rather than rights. The latter he understood in terms of license or discretionary powers that carried with them the implication that they could be at odds with one another and with duties: this extended to his critique of the purported rights of “society” over the individual, as I will discuss later in the chapter in relation to the notion of “sociability.”

He also addressed this criticism to the right of property; although in the later editions he was to tone down these claims and even at this stage, he was by no means an advocate of levelling that can be related to his view on gradual rather than revolutionary reform. “Hasty and undigested tumults may take place,” he wrote, “under the idea of an equalization of property; but it is only a calm and clear conviction of justice…that can introduce an invariable system of this sort. Attempts without this preparation will be productive only of confusion. Their effect will be momentary and a new and more barbarous inequality will succeed.” Indeed, he was to argue subsequently that the right to property was derivative of the right to private judgment.

But Godwin’s criticism of private property in 1793 only served to accentuate the independent and frugal aspects of virtue present in his thought and it was in this sense that it resonated with the ideal of republican virtue. Thus, while the language of civic virtue advocated the protection of individual property, this was not constructed as a defense of accumulation or aggrandizement of wealth. In fact, it was symbolic of precisely the opposite tendency—as a critique of luxury and inequality and a defense of the inviolability of the individual as an autonomous agent. It was essentially the “freehold” nature of ownership that was the key to it being a manifestation of individual liberty and independence.

The “protosocialist” egalitarian tendencies present in his views on property also had implications for a conception of virtue that reflected his collectivist
concerns for the common good. Collectivism of a more participatory nature was also in evidence in Godwin’s thoroughgoing emphasis on public-mindedness. With Cato as his inspiration, Godwin affirmed the centrality of “public spirit” in his attack on monarchy. “Why is it that the language of integrity and public spirit is constantly regarded among us as hypocrisy?” he asked. This concern for the public good tied in with his earlier pronouncement of virtue being more than a passive state of being: “Innocence is not virtue. Virtue demands the active employment of an ardent mind in the promotion of the general good.” Later, he talked of “the divinity of truth and the sacred obligation of public good” and connected virtue with both public and private interest. Godwin’s utilitarianism, which dominated his theory of justice, can also be seen to support his concern for the greater good of the whole as against individual egoism. On this view, Godwin was by no means putting forward a solely egoistic and individualist philosophy.

**Society and Sociability**

As his preoccupations with the public good and the active over the passive nature of virtue demonstrate, the emphasis on private judgment and individual independence did not lead to an entirely atomized view of society. In this respect, Godwin also displayed a tenacious commitment to the idea of public discussion. In a chapter in which he considered “three principal causes of moral improvement,” he enumerated literature, education, and political justice. In his expansive definition of “literature,” he gave conversation a privileged position, noting that books “have by their very nature but a limited operation . . . But conversation accustoms us to hear a variety of sentiments, obliges us to exercise patience and attention, and gives freedom and elasticity to our mental disquisitions.”

It is instructive to unpack Godwin’s views on the virtues of conversation as the preferred medium of sociability from his criticisms of society, association, and cooperation more generally. Godwin’s reservations toward forms of association as being susceptible to mob passion over private reasoned discourse have tended to obscure his persistent advocacy of conversation as an exception to the rule and to accentuate the individualist over the communitalist aspects of his thought. He wrote of this distinction thus:

But though association, in the received sense of that term, must be granted to be an instrument of a very dangerous nature, it should be remembered that unreserved communication in a smaller circle, and especially among persons who are already awakened to the pursuit of truth, is of unquestionable advantage.
Despite his criticisms of forms of cooperation impinging on individual autonomy, it is then, notably, conversation that Godwin exempted. “Conversation,” he argued, “is a species of cooperation, one or the other party always yielding to have his ideas guided by the other: and yet conversation and the intercourse of mind with mind seem to be the most fertile sources of improvement.” Truth-seeking communicative interaction was to be the complement to private judgment. As Philp has noted, “what is foundational in his work is the basic conviction that private judgment and public discussion are the only appropriate mediums for the development and promulgation of moral and political principles.”

Conversation, as a “privatized” model of public discussion was thus to play an integral role in Godwin’s radical philosophy and a vital means to social and political amelioration. Indeed, he stated, in unequivocal terms, “the best interests of mankind eminently depend upon the freedom of social communication.” In a chapter in Political Justice on the cultivation of truth where Godwin connected virtue with knowledge, he wrote of the centrality of communication for progressive enlightenment: “I cannot have intercourse with any human being who may not be the better for that intercourse. If he be already just and virtuous, these qualities are improved by communication.”

For Godwin, deliberation here was primarily a means to the discovery of truth and was to be free and unfettered. He said of this: “Indeed, if there be such a thing as truth, it must infallibly be struck out by the collision of mind with mind.” Truth was to be unfolded through a dialectical process of ever-progressive knowledge where errors, moral and political, would gradually but inevitably be eroded through the force of universal reason acting upon rational interlocutors. “The only substantial method for propagating truth,” he wrote, “is discussion, so that errors of one man may be detected by the acuteness and severe disquisition of his neighbours.” This illustrated the role of public opinion and public censure in society’s gradual self-regulation as it becomes emancipated from the structures of illegitimate authority. It is also the very role of the public, however, that he paradoxically feared for its power to interfere with the individual’s private judgment.

This dichotomous view of the role of the public can also be related to his wider critique of all forms of corporate authority, where the notion of “society” itself becomes problematical. For Godwin, society “possesses nothing more but what individuals have brought into a common stock.” Being “the aggregate of individuals,” society “has no right to assume the prerogatives of an infallible judge.” It is essentially the abstract nature of society’s putative authority that Godwin condemned, whereas he believed individuals “are everything, and society, abstracted from the individuals of which it is
composed, nothing.”  But the primacy accorded to the individual does not give way to a rampant egoistic individualism and does not preclude association or collective social action. Godwin’s views on this can be understood through an implicit distinction in his thought between “society” as representing a form of abstract, corporate despotism and “sociability” as the indispensable medium for achieving his vision of a community of rational and autonomous agents. As he observed, in Shaftesburian tones, “man is a social animal... he is eminently social by his habits.”

In the first edition of the work, tensions between the will to urge people to think for themselves and act as autonomous agents and the belief in the omnipotent dictates of truth were also already becoming evident. In a passage where he famously condemned all forms of cooperation as being evil, Godwin acknowledged the inevitability of diversity of opinion:

So far as mind is in a state of progressive improvement, we are perpetually coming nearer to each other. But there are subjects about which we shall continually differ, and ought to differ. The ideas, the associations and circumstances of each man are properly his own; and it is a pernicious system that would lead us to require all men, however different their circumstances, to act in many of the common affairs of life by a precise general rule.

Godwin wanted to avoid the possibility of human beings becoming unreflective automatons submerged under the great machine of “society.” In doing so, he is also continually grappled with one of the classic conundrums of political theory—reconciling individual agency with collective social action and, at times, it almost seems as if he was disturbed by the potential totalitarian logic of his own philosophical commitments. Though there was undoubtedly, for Godwin, a belief in the “standard of eternal truth” that permeated the pages of *Political Justice*, this assumption, when placed against his prescriptive demands for intellectual freedom, was fraught with tension. Indeed, his notion of public deliberation, in his critical discussion of social contract theory as justification for government, was arguably pregnant with an acknowledgment of the impossibility of epistemological finality and ontological certainty, in his assertion that “the doctrine of common deliberation is of a prospective, and not a retrospective nature.” “It is impossible to imagine a principle of more injurious tendency,” he continued, “than that which shall teach me to disarm my future wisdom by my past folly.” Godwin adopted public discussion as the method of diffusing truth but at the same time was uneasy about a closed system of truth as being yet another form of arbitrary authority over the individual. This also resonated
with his wider criticisms of human associations that he believed tended to produce “a fallacious uniformity of opinion.” Much better, he counselled, that “human beings should meet together, not to enforce, but to enquire.”

The reservations and qualifications to cooperation he put forward at this stage are suggestive of an underlying tension that gradually deepened, between the imperatives of individual self-development and autonomy and the necessity of sociability as a means to this end and, ultimately, to achieving the utilitarian goal of the greater good. This can also be understood in terms of an underlying departure from the rationalist account of his antiauthoritarian thought to a more skeptical one. I explore this shift, as manifested in his deployment of the idiom of politeness, in the remainder of the chapter.

**Politeness, Radicalism, and Discursive Liberty**

With characteristic exactitude, and no less a degree of humility, in his autobiographical writings Godwin conceded to some of the inadequacies of his original version of *Political Justice*:

> The Enquiry concerning Political Justice I apprehend to be blemished principally by three errors. 1. Stoicism, or an inattention to the principle, that pleasure and pain are the only bases upon which morality can rest. 2. Sandemanianism, or the inattention to the principle, that feeling, and not judgment, is the source of human actions. 3. The unqualified condemnation of the private affections.

Godwin went on to describe the root of these errors and the reasons for his changes of opinion. He cited his reading of David Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–1740) as being responsible for demolishing the latter two errors relating to the significance of feeling. But his perusal of Hume was only a part of the shift that was taking place in his thought. It was also informed by the social and political context, not least the wavering fortunes of radicalism in the 1790s, and his personal experiences and development. Consequently, a confluence of changes was gradually merging that can be understood as being responses to both external stimuli and internal intellectual developments. These changes indicated a departure from a thoroughly rationalist position and consisted primarily of recognizing the importance of passion or the private affections; an increased acknowledgment of political realism; and a consequent shift toward a more culturally refined discourse and program for reform.

Taken together, these developments were mutually supportive of an underlying shift away from the abstract to the particular, and from reason
to feeling, as pillars of Godwin’s philosophical speculation. One implication of these changes was a reconstitution of his notion of social interaction that was placed more firmly within the scope of polite sociability and wrested from its tendency toward a more abstracted and absolute rationality.

Shaftesbury and Polite Virtue

Godwin was familiar with Shaftesbury whose work, in the late-eighteenth-century context of the “debate on France,” arose more usually in relation to the idea of universal benevolence as a counter to moral parochialism. His journal entries also cited his specific reading of Shaftesbury’s *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions Times* (1711, 1714), including in the period before the publication of the second edition of *Political Justice*, and he is mentioned in other works. My main purpose in introducing Shaftesbury here is not primarily as a source of direct and conscious influence on Godwin’s shift to politeness, though there is textual evidence to suggest this that I shall return to presently that lends greater credence to the more general ideological resonance I am identifying. Through Klein’s interpretation of Shaftesbury, I attempt to show how politeness, as an approach to social interaction, can act as an ideological vehicle for the propagation of a “radical” philosophical agenda. Shaftesbury’s thought is wide-ranging and Klein’s work points to facets of it and their implications that are not all of concern to me here. I wish to draw attention to three aspects in particular relating to the deployment of politeness that, I argue, are pertinent to an understanding of Godwin’s adoption of the idiom: first, Shaftesbury’s concern with sustaining both individual liberty and social order through social engagement; second, the idea of a culturally refined notion of civic virtue in which manners are tied to liberty; and third, the location of liberty, more specifically, in the medium of polite conversation.

Klein engages in an ideological reading of Shaftesbury’s major work, *Characteristics*, a collection of earlier essays. He draws attention to the way in which Shaftesbury adapted the idiom of politeness to serve his ideological ends. Politeness, Klein writes, “coordinated description and prescription, allowing a writer to perform verbal acts of considerable complexity, in which the past and present of expressive forms were used for ideological purposes.” In the case of Shaftesbury these purposes were shaped by a preoccupation with the preservation of English liberty and the special responsibilities of an elite to guard it. Klein argues that Shaftesbury conceived of his ideological project as a defense and legitimation of the post-1688 Whig order that aimed at shifting the claims of cultural accomplishment from the Tories to the Whigs. Seeing Shaftesbury as a “cultural ideologist,” Klein goes on to
describe politeness as an interpretative scheme, an idealized vision of human intercourse and a master metaphor of refined sociability.

In the context of the encroaching urbanism and the rise of print media in early-eighteenth-century Britain, politeness represented the displacement of the authority vested in traditional institutional structures by “offering an alternative to the reliance on traditional authoritative institutions for ordering the discursive world, because it sought processes within the babble, diversity and liberty of the new discursive world of the Town that would produce order and direction.” It thus embodied both a culture of liberty and a culture of criticism and involved a radical reconfiguration of the loci of the expression of unfettered individual action. Importantly, it also aimed at sustaining order in society, not displacing it, by the reorientation of the cultural space within which liberty flourished and through the philosophical conflation of ethics with aesthetics. As Klein argues, “the desire for a normative grasp of human interactions issued in ethics and the desire for a normative grasp of forms issued in aesthetics.” This was reflected in Shaftesbury’s emphasis on “taste” and is integral to Klein’s account. Klein sees politeness as having three dimensions: social, psychological, and formal. It is the latter, the formal, that involves a grasp of “forms” and that he describes as the “how” of social relations, that brings “aesthetic concerns into close contiguity with ethical ones.” This represents the art or technique of engaging in refined sociability with “formality” coming into close alignment with “morality” and with order.

The requirements of liberty and order were thus central preoccupations and can be seen as emanating from Shaftesbury’s own anti-authoritarian critique of Church and monarchy. “Like other Europeans of the eighteenth-century who were attempting to imagine a world without royal and ecclesiastical authoritarianism,” Klein has argued, “Shaftesbury developed norms for conduct, conversation and limited conflict that could accommodate both liberty and order, both individual actualization and social responsibility.”

For Shaftesbury, human beings were naturally sociable and it was the tension between this recognition and the need for individual moral autonomy that provided a significant impetus for his project. Shaftesbury’s approach to philosophy thus “emerged from the need to resolve the claims of both moral autarky and sociability.” It was within this process of resolution that politeness provided a via media that evaded “the dangers of sociability without incurring those of isolation.” Godwin, in a critical passage on solitary imprisonment, displayed a similar concern with the dangers of isolation for the development of the individual and the wider community. “To be virtuous,” he argued, “it is requisite that we should consider men and their
relation to each other... Solitude absolutely considered may instigate us to
serve ourselves, but not to serve our neighbours. In Godwin, this was
further reflected in the practice of writing itself that was rarely, if ever, a
solitary activity, but rather conceived as a communal act in which his work
was constantly being read by others, as he read their work, in a social and
literary milieu of intellectual debate and exchange.

The dissimulative tendencies in politeness also had dual implications for
liberty and for order and point to the fact that politeness can have both base
and lofty connotations. On the one hand, they signified the protection of
the self necessary for the development of individual autonomy and cultiva-
tion where “public demeanour was not a simple window on the inner self
but a more complicated and mediated construction.” On the other, they
implied courtesy to others and provided an external normative framework
within which social order was maintained through toleration and respect
for the liberty of others. This latter aspect was important in articulating
Shaftesbury’s criticisms of the authoritarian, or “magisterial” approach to
discourse. As with Godwin, Shaftesbury aimed principally at the produc-
tion of a community of autonomous moral agents. In this respect, “moraliz-
ing” forms of discourse, which included the academic, the pedantic and the
religious or moral sermon, were seen to promote passivity under authority,
rather than active, participatory autonomy.

Since social interaction was not only unavoidable but desirable and the
moral autonomy of the individual vital for liberty, politeness was seen as an
effective means of reconciling these potentially conflicting requirements.
Shaftesbury’s concern with sociability also relates to his critique of philo-
sophical egoism, and self-love that was largely directed at the atomism of
Hobbes. Politeness was, in this sense, a way of reconciling the world of learn-
ing with the social world by relocating the site of philosophical reflection
away from the ivory towers of introspection to the real world of conversa-
tional engagement. Notwithstanding this synthesis between philosophy and
worldly action, in its refinement it was to be public, though not demotic.

Klein locates Shaftesbury’s appropriation of politeness within the politi-
cal language of civic humanism and in doing so unearths an alternative
dimension of civic virtue latent within the tradition’s own intellectual
resources. Iain Hampsher-Monk has also noted the plasticity of politeness
as a mode of mobilizing contending ideological positions in the eighteenth
century. “Like all languages,” he has argued, “the discourse of polite socia-
bility was open-textured and capable of being evaluated and exploited in
diverse ways.” In common with Klein, Hampsher-Monk connects this
elasticity with the equally malleable resources of civic humanism, asserting
“the very structures of civic republican discourse left open the possibility of
doing this, for ‘manners’ had long played a role in the civic understanding of the interplay between institutions, liberty and individual action.”

Civic virtue was thus seen to be transmuted not abandoned or displaced. 

Klein has traced Shaftesbury’s departure from the more conventional account of the civic tradition to his close association in the 1690s with a group of prominent Country Whigs that included Robert Molesworth, John Toland, Andrew Fletcher, Walter Moyle, John Trenchard, and Thomas Gordon. In the republican lineage Pocock has identified and interpreted, these Whigs were influenced by Henry Neville, Harrington, and Machiavelli in their conception of civic virtue. This entailed martial strength, frugality, and simplicity manifested in the defense of individual independence and liberty through the bearing of arms and freehold property, and public-mindedness through active participatory citizenship. They adopted this civic idiom, or what Pocock has called a neo-Harringtonian critique, as a mode of political discourse in the service of post-1688 Whig oppositionalism. The neo-Harringtonians’ account of liberty had little or no room for the assimilation of politeness within its conceptual framework. Shaftesbury, however, was averse to the primitivist sentiments that attached to this conception of republican virtue that can also be related to his aesthetic sensibilities. He intended to fuse the accomplishments of culture with those of virtue, rather than dissociate the two. In this way, his aim was to appropriate the accomplishments of refined civilization, through the idiom of politeness, for Whiggish culture that stood against the corresponding claims of those of Church and Court. To achieve this, he pointed to alternative intellectual resources inherent within the republican tradition.

The model Klein draws attention to in his interpretation of Shaftesbury’s “polite” notion of virtue is that of Athens that is juxtaposed to Sparta. Shaftesbury invokes Athens as a paradigm of liberty where the arts, aesthetic taste, intellectual, and cultural cultivation were integral to securing liberty. As Klein argues, “the association of liberty and letters could not be supported by the notion of citizenship to which Machiavelli and his English successors had subscribed. Athenian diversity rather than Spartan uniformity was the congenial setting for a cultural flowering.” Politeness was, in this way, not only the product but also the medium within which liberty flourished. It represented the ascendancy of the cultural over the political in its “reconceptualisation of man’s nature as sociable rather than political.”

This conception of virtue thus entailed “a program of education in which the moral and literary would be combined to produce virtuous public action.” It was thus also publicly oriented. Within this context, Klein highlights the active participation associated with the senatorial ideal of citizenship embodied in Cicero as the classical exemplar that informed
Shaftesbury’s ideal of communicative interaction. Here, the values of the civic tradition—liberty, independence, autonomy, and citizenship—were focused on the active pursuit of debating and decision making, oratory, culture, and learning. According to Klein, “Cicero’s synthetic design was distinguished by its subsumption of rhetoric and philosophy to the service of public life and the standards of good Roman citizenship.” It was this discursive dimension of liberty, along with his embodiment as both a man of action and a man of learning, that connected him to Shaftesbury.

In language that bears a striking similarity to that of Godwin’s on the vitality of social communication through the fortuitous “collision of mind with mind,” Shaftesbury asserted that “all Politeness is owing to Liberty. We polish one another, and rub off our Corners and rough Sides by a kind of amicable collision.” Klein sees Shaftesbury’s exposition of polite conversation as a Habermasian “ideal speech situation.” He elaborates on the nature of this discursive practice that combined a “politics of popular assent and also a condition of free interaction.” In this respect, Shaftesbury was concerned with the emancipatory potential of undistorted communication in public intercourse.

Ideal conversation was a moral framework for public interchange, since its conventions embodied the norms of freedom, equality, activity, and pleasure. In allowing individuals to become more rational and more autonomous, it fit into an emancipatory program. At the same time it was a model of intellectually productive discourse since it provided the best conditions for the advancement of reason.

Klein demonstrates that, for Shaftesbury, the medium of polite conversation provided the ideal site for the flourishing of liberty and the advancement of his ideological aims. In appropriating the model of polite discourse from the Court and monarchy and assimilating it to the Whig gentleman scholar and virtuous citizen, Shaftesbury had both democratized and publicized its radical import. It is this ideological maneuver that is also pertinent, I would argue, in helping to shed light on Godwin’s underlying agenda for antiauthoritarian liberty in relation to his shift to politeness in the 1790s.

Godwin, Politeness, and Radical Liberty

In the polarized climate of the 1790s, loyalism, most notably in the refined eloquence of Burke and his invocations of honor, tradition, and chivalry, came to occupy the “polite” ground. This stood in contrast to the straight-talking, “common sense” of Paine’s revolutionary exhortations and was as much an
ideological strategy on the part of the loyalists to discredit the radicals as
dangerous rabble-rousers than an inherent product of the way in which, in
the main, the radical response was framed. But, as Hampsher-Monk has
observed, the language of politeness was “open-textured” and allowed for
multiple readings and uses. Its increasing use by Godwin, I would argue, can
in this sense also be understood as an attempted appropriation of an alterna-
tive dimension of politeness for the radical cause—this being the legitimacy
it embodied as a signifier of a culture of progress and a civilizing force.
Politeness, moreover, resonated with Godwin’s own literary and cultural
sensibilities, his self-image as a man of letters, and the changing nature and
fortunes of the radical constituency that comprised his audience.

Godwin’s ideological project involved the harnessing of radical and
progressive elements of society through the emancipation of the individ-
ual’s private judgment and personal development as a counterweight to
the arbitrary authority of the oppressive institutions of state and society,
Pitt’s government being the most proximate and pressing example. The
defense of individual liberty was the kernel of his anarchism and the mani-
festation of his antiauthoritarian political thought. It is also a fundamen-
tal commitment that remains constant throughout his work. As a vehicle
for these ideological aims, I would argue that Godwin also shared with
Shaftesbury a concern with sustaining both liberty and order; with propa-
gating a refined conception of virtue; and with identifying polite sociabil-
ity as a site for the expression of liberty. In echoing these Shaftesburian
preoccupations, Godwin was similarly and increasingly concerned with the
production of a community of cultivated, enlightened, and autonomous
moral agents who acted in the service of the public good. I would argue,
however, that Godwin gave his adaptive employment of politeness a less
“ideal” configuration in so far as his shift to politeness was a response to
and grounded in an increasing recognition of actually existing social and
political conditions.

In terms of the argument I am pursuing here, in regard to the role of
politeness as a discursive expression of radical liberty in Godwin’s thought,
drawing on Klein’s reading of Shaftesbury as a polite civic humanist,
Victoria Myers has also drawn attention to the civic function of the relation-
ship between oratory and freedom in Godwin’s focus on private con-
versation. Myers has argued that “Godwin absorbed classical oratory into
the dialogic mode to make it appropriate to an anarchic system” ultimately
making “conversation replace the mode of government.” In doing so, she has
suggested that Godwin “wished to turn conversation itself into a mediating
institution, by giving it civic purpose and erecting it into a new customary
order.” 82 Although Myers is concerned with the role of conversation in
Godwin’s thought between 1785 and 1793 and, thus, not engaged with the later, skeptical developments I am tracing in Godwin’s thought after the initial publication of *Political Justice*, her identification of the civic function of conversation with Godwin’s wider anarchistic commitments is pertinent to my interpretation of the civic and anarchist function of politeness. More recently, Jon Mee has also signalled the social and political significance of the centrality of the culture of conversation throughout the long eighteenth century, including in relation to Godwin.

For both internal intellectual and external circumstantial reasons that came to shape the evolution of his thought in the 1790s, for Godwin, more than simply providing a notional model of communicative intercourse, politeness, I argue, came to represent a more realistic and skeptical mode of social relations within which to address liberty, order, and anarchy. Godwin’s adaptation of politeness in this skeptical mode can also be seen in light of the gradualism and realism that increasingly infused his antiauthoritarian goals. As a speculative presupposition, I would suggest, it acted as a more consciously realistic strategy for sustaining both liberty and social order under conditions of anarchy. Godwin was thus addressing liberty in an increasingly cultural mode drawing on a model of polite sociability that was skeptical of universalizing claims to certainty and truth in its aversion to dogma and to forms of authoritarian moralism.

In the first edition of *Political Justice*, Godwin conceived of politeness as the antithesis of his belief in sincerity as a moral duty. In pointing to its emphasis on form over substance, and on flattery over candor, his critique resonated with the republican language of Country virtue over Court corruption:

> And what is the benefit to result from this indiscriminate, undistinguishing manner of treating our neighbours? Whatever benefit it be, it no doubt exists in considerable vigour in the present state of polished society, where forms perpetually intrude to cut off all intercourse between the feelings of mankind; and I can scarcely tell a man on the one hand “that I esteem his character and honour his virtues” or on the other “that he is fallen into an error which will be of prejudicial consequence to him” without trampling upon all the barriers of politeness.

Politeness here signified dissimulation and, for Godwin, there could be no moral compromise with sincerity. Time and again in the work, he stressed the principle of candor, harking back to his Dissenting roots. With the publication of *The Enquirer* in 1797, however, Godwin displayed a move
away from this stringent rationalistic and moralistic tone. He wrote in the preface of the new method he was adopting as “an incessant recurrence to experiment and actual observation” rather than working abstractly and deductively, as he had previously done in *Political Justice*, “laying down one or two simple principles, which seem scarcely to be exposed to the hazard of refutation; and then developing them, applying them to a number of points, and following them into a number of inferences.” The world in Godwin’s eyes now appeared considerably more complex and did not readily permit of abstract speculation but rather required “the perpetual attention we owe to experience, the pole-star of truth” to make sense of it. But Godwin did not sacrifice his radical agenda for liberty on the altar of his newly found philosophical modesty.

In his discussion, “Of Politeness,” in *The Enquirer*, Godwin linked politeness to what he termed “lesser morality” that he contrasted with the “greater morality” that is concerned with sublime acts. In its association with “lesser morality,” politeness can be viewed as a means of “democratization”—not only of the potential for intellectual refinement but also through the civilizing effects of a participatory culture in the linking of polite sociability with quotidian practices. In making this distinction, Godwin tied politeness to the milieu of regularized association and to specific contexts of perpetual social intercourse,

Hence it appears that the lesser moralities are of most importance where politeness is commonly least thought of, in the bosom of family intercourse and *where people have occasion most constantly to associate together.*

Politeness was thus the mode of social interaction most suited to situations of close, incessant and regularized social contact. In this way, it acted as a way of sustaining these social relations as well as characterizing them: it was both the means and the end of sociability, both social form and social more, providing a defense of liberty and a system of order. In situating it within the realm of lesser morality, it is tied to a context that is both “democratized” and, by extension, antiauthoritarian. In its shift away from the “greater morality,” it can also be understood as being tied to Godwin’s move away from the more grand, abstract, moral focus on society to a greater regard for the particular, minor virtues of everyday life. In this sense, politeness acted as recognition of the requisite means of socializing the passions under conditions of increasingly unbounded liberty. Indeed, this realism is evident, I would argue, in Godwin’s growing compromise with the demands of candor in acknowledging that we are not yet in a “state of sufficient improvement”
for “the most perfect sincerity in our language to apply.” Godwin tied this qualification to virtue:

It is true, that genuine virtue requires of us a certain frankness and unre-serve. But it is not less true, that it requires of us a quality in some degree contrasted with this, that we set a guard upon the door of our lips, that we carefully watch over our passions, that we never forget what we owe to ourselves, and that we maintain a vigilant consciousness strictly animad-verting and commenting upon the whole series of our actions.

In the work, Godwin also cited Shaftesbury directly and further intimated at the connection between politeness and antiauthoritarianism:

Why is admonition so frequently unpalatable? Not so much, as lord Shaftesbury has well observed, because few people know how to take advice, as because still fewer know how to give it. The monitor usually assumes the tone of a master. At this usurpation human independence reasonably spurns.

Here, most clearly, it is precisely Godwin’s antiauthoritarianism that led him to become more receptive to the notion of politeness. Forcefully rebuking another’s error, in spite of the inherent moral worth of its frankness, had now become an unwelcome and unhelpful “usurpation of human independence.” But this recognition did not give way to a purely relativist descent into anarchistic chaos for “politeness, properly considered,” however, was “no enemy to admonition.” It represented the less oppressive, less dogmatic path to reform to that, Godwin now acknowledged, human beings, as much through the “irrationality” of feelings than rational calculation, are more susceptible, and in which order is sustained not uprooted. As he now recognized, “true politeness is a branch of virtue; and the cornerstone upon which it rests is in the minuter and continually recurring incidents of human life, to seek to secure to its neighbour the greatest sum of pleasurable sensation, with least balance of painful.” Significantly, sincerity was also now seen as being of instrumental, rather than intrinsic value. It is “only a means, and is valuable so far as it answers the purposes of benevolence; benevolence is substantive.” In retaining an ethical commitment to benevolence, by subordinating sincerity to it, and to utility, in securing his neighbor’s plea-sure over pain, Godwin was also attempting to reconcile politeness to his more communalist concerns. As with Shaftesbury, the dissimulative tendencies inherent within politeness also bring with them the seemingly perverse potential for individual liberty and social order.
The antiauthoritarian aspect of social communication associated with polite sociability was complemented by toleration. Godwin’s greater emphasis on the principle of toleration over the dogmatic tendency of belief in one’s own knowledge of truth further revealed his shift of opinion. In the process, he also forged a more direct link between restraint, liberty, and manners by arguing that “toleration, in its full import, requires, not only that there shall be no laws to restrain opinion, but that forebearance and liberality shall be moulded into the manners of the community.”

Before moving on to the discursive implications of these principles, it is significant to note that Godwin’s changing attitude to luxury also elucidated his changing conception of “manners” and with it virtue. In his revisions in the later editions of *Political Justice*, he tied luxury to the benefits of civilization thus signalling a departure from his earlier frugal conception of virtue:

Perhaps a state of luxury, such as is here described, and a state of inequality, might be a stage through which it is necessary to pass in order to arrive at the goal of civilization. The only security we can ultimately have for an equality of conditions, is a general persuasion of the iniquity of accumulation, and the uselessness of wealth in the purchase of happiness. But this persuasion could not be established in a savage state; nor indeed can it be maintained, if we should fall back into barbarism.

He went on to qualify his concession to luxury as a virtue:

It depends upon the meaning in which it is understood, to determine whether it is to be regarded as a virtue or a vice. If we understand by luxury, something which is to be enjoyed exclusively by an individual, and the equivalent of which it is not in the power of every individual in the community to procure; to indulge ourselves in luxury is then a vice. But, if we understand by luxury, which is frequently the case, every accommodation which is not absolutely necessary to maintain us in sound and healthful existence, the procuring and communicating luxuries may then be virtuous.

Significantly, this now refined notion of virtue that permitted of luxury, albeit attenuated in its definition, was also publicly oriented. Here, Godwin was anxious to separate luxury from its self-indulgent, excessive, and private connotations. Virtue was thus freed from its primitivist associations and while, on the one hand, it became a product of intellectual and cultural sophistication and achievement, on the other, it remained firmly situated in the public realm. In this way, the refinement of manners acted as a
counterweight to the adverse effects of luxury: luxury was thus assimilated to virtue. In a passage in which Godwin takes Mandeville as “the great champion of this doctrine”—a defender of luxury—he framed, most explicitly, the contrasting attributes of a primitivist and refined notion of virtue illustrating, through the claims of the latter, that those attributes “which separate the man from the brute, are most worthy of our affection and cultivation. Elegance of taste, refinement of sentiment, depth of penetration and largeness of science, are among the noblest ornaments of man.”100 Godwin also made a similar distinction in *The Enquirer* between forms of luxury that debase and the need for cultural refinement and enlightened cultivation, or a more rational use of luxury.

Those hours which are not required for the production of the necessaries of life may be devoted to the cultivation of the understanding, the enlarging of our stock of knowledge, the refining of our taste, and thus opening to us new and more exquisite sources of enjoyment.101

He further noted that “it is probable that the well-being of man would be best promoted by the production of some superfluities and luxuries.”102 The elitist tendencies in Godwin’s thought that I shall discuss shortly provide further support to his shift from a frugal to a more refined, cultural conception of virtue.

Along with the emphasis Godwin places on freedom of opinion and tolerance, there was also an associated suggestion of realism, if not relativism, that entered into his conception of communicative interaction. “Alas! Impartiality,” he declared, “is a virtue hung too high, to be almost ever within the reach of man.”103 The idea of empathy was also advocated as a discursive rule and can be understood in relation to this emphasis on relativism in its recognition that everyone has their own view of the world. In Essay IX, “Of Difference of Opinion,” Godwin wrote, “one of the best practical rules of morality that ever was delivered, is that of putting ourselves in the place of another before we act or decide anything respecting him.”104

The movement toward relativism is implied further in a passage where the evolution of his conception of discursive rules of engagement was most clearly pronounced:

There is a difference of opinion between me and the person whose conduct I apprehend to be imprudent or erroneous. Why not discuss this difference upon equal terms? . . . Why not, as is reasonable, offer what occurs to me, rather as a hint for enquiry, than as a decision emanating from an oracle of truth?105
What now constitutes “reasonableness” has clearly shifted from the earlier ideal of absolute rationality in the first edition of *Political Justice*. Godwin has redirected his attack on arbitrary authority to the despotic nature of the belief in the truth of one’s opinion over that of others—the earlier tensions suggested above have now cracked open. In so doing he has opened up the realm of critical discussion as the true home of liberty. In his enunciation of the three principal errors that had “blemished” the original writing of *Political Justice* in which he cited Hume’s influence on him, he had also written of “how strongly these errors are connected with the Calvinist system, which had been so deeply wrought into my mind in early life as to enable these errors long to survive the general system of religious opinions of which they formed a part.” Sandeman’s cold rationalism had now given way to the relativity of arguments and the knowledge of truth itself had come into question as had the infallibility of opinions. In divining truth, Godwin seemed to be suggesting, there was a danger that we arrogated to ourselves the role of God. “Every argument, however skilfully treated, has perhaps its weak and vulnerable part.” Situating the engine of reform in the hands of an enlightened radical vanguard would be one way of overcoming the fatal problem of cloaking the ignorant masses with the pretence of infallibility.

Godwin also reaffirmed his departure from a stringent rationalism in the formation of opinions in his *Thoughts Occasioned by the Perusal of Dr Parr’s Spital Sermon*, acknowledging the influence of temperament and external social conditions rather than simply the internal intellectual logic of argumentation.

> It is seldom that we are persuaded to adopt opinions, or repersuaded to abandon them, by the mere force of arguments... Our creed is, ninety-nine times in a hundred, the pure growth of our temper and social feelings. The human intellect is a sort of barometer, directed in its variations by the atmosphere which surrounds it.

His skepticism toward claims to certainty was also reinforced in the essay: “The man who enters the school of science pre-determined and pre-engaged as to the conclusions in which his enquiries must terminate, makes a mock at science, and tramples upon the divinity of the human mind.” Significantly, it is the human mind rather than truth or reason that Godwin now divined and his position can be seen to represent a more resounding echo of the earlier tensions implicit in his critique of social contract in *Political Justice* on the inescapably “prospective” nature of enquiry. This position was also in evidence in his “Essay of Scepticism” in which he strove to “delineate that
species of scepticism, which is most consonant to reason and most conducive to happiness.” He displayed doubts concerning the attainment of knowledge and no longer harbored the naive optimism about ascertaining truth. Again, he emphasized discussion as the medium within which to investigate and discover and set out the discursive rules that the interlocutor should best adhere to asserting that “he has no proud confidence in his own judgment; he is at all times prepared to listen to new evidence, or to new statements of the evidence he has already considered… Yet the fallibility of his judgment does not prevent him from using the best instrument within his reach.”

Before moving to the elitist aspects of Godwin’s thought, it is worth noting that it was not only the substantive content of *The Enquirer* that signalled Godwin’s harnessing of the idiom of politeness. With its discursive treatment of specific topics, the work itself as a whole can be seen to embody an exercise in polite discourse. As David Fleisher has remarked, “an attempt was made in the style to achieve the semi-conversational tone of serious informal discussion.” Here, a parallel with Shaftesbury’s all-encompassing ideological project can also be sensed in its penetration of the very method and style of writing adopted. Godwin had departed from the rigid and regimented philosophical precision within which the arguments in *Political Justice* had been framed to embark upon a freer, more open-ended mode of writing. In doing so, he took on the role of interlocutor engaged in a dialogue with gentleman scholars rather than pedagogue, or pedant, preaching philosophical truths to the unenlightened, thus magnifying his arguments on autonomy and equality in childhood education in the first part of *The Enquirer* and echoing his earlier views in *An Account of the Seminary*. As with the emphasis on the intimate relationship between aesthetics and ethics in Shaftesbury, the literary “form” becomes, in Godwin, suggestive of his wider normative concerns. In its aesthetic form, *The Enquirer* both transcribed and prescribed the art of polite sociability, representing an antidote to authoritarian moralism.

**Elite Radicalism**

In *The Enquirer*, Godwin explicitly asserted that “the cause of political reform and the cause of intellectual and literary refinement are inseparably connected” accentuating and complementing his shift toward a more polite notion of virtue. The elitist aspects of his thought can, in fact, be traced back to the first edition of *Political Justice*, notwithstanding his talk of the “hypocrisy of politeness” and, in this sense, signal an earlier tension in his thought. In it, he claimed, “great geniuses have usually existed
in a cluster.” 117 This elitist sensibility is also evident in his view of democracy as encouraging ignorance and the emergence of demagogues. In drawing attention to the general features of democracy, he observed, “in political society it is reasonable to suppose that the wise will be outnumbered by the unwise.” 118 Godwin’s Platonic notion of an elite vanguard has its parallel here with Shaftesbury’s league of cultivated gentlemen. For Godwin, this was a necessary implication arising from the present state of intellectual development in society. In his discussion of the inexorable diffusion of truth, for example, he wrote of there being two classes of people divided by their capacity for enlightened thinking,

The difficulty is to distinguish it in the first instance, and in the next to present it in that unequivocal form which shall enable it to command universal assent. This must necessarily be the task of the few… Society, as it presently exists in the world, will long be divided into two classes, those who have leisure for study, and those who importunate necessities perpetually urge them to temporary industry. 119

This can also be understood as an early realist acknowledgment of things as they are upon which reform must be grafted. The gradualist and realist dimensions of Godwin’s thought will be taken up further in the next part. The elitist dimensions of his thought here provide support to his receptivity to polite sociability as a means to reform. If earlier in the decade Godwin was acknowledging politeness as the language of the loyalist establishment, he now, I would argue, was attempting to appropriate it for a more radical and emancipatory agenda. In his Thoughts Occasioned, he intimated at this reversal more explicitly:

As the parties now stand arranged, the advocates of the progressive nature of man are the champions of refinement and cultivation and politeness, which their adversaries would without mitigation or remorse exchange for the savage state. 120

This elitist tendency also intercepted with other aspects of his thought. His ethical commitments to utilitarianism, for example, also carried with them a stratified account of the moral worth of individuals. “If justice have any meaning,” he wrote, “it is just that I should contribute everything in my power to the benefit of the whole.” 121 As I also mentioned in the Introduction, in the privileging of Fenelon in the fire incident, however, this contribution extended to submitting one’s familial connections to an impersonal comparative assessment of moral worth. Thus, while in Political Justice Godwin
argued for equality in terms of the universal potential for enlightenment in asserting “our senses and faculties are of the same denomination. Our pleasures and pains will therefore be the same. We are all of us endowed with reason, able to compare, to judge and to infer,” 122 he also acknowledged a hierarchy of merit in seeking to identify the locus and agents of reform.

But what of Godwin’s antiauthoritarian ideology? For Godwin, elitism and radicalism were not warriors but bedfellows. He couched his radical defense of liberty in elitist language rather than advocating the perpetuation of a bifurcated hierarchy of humankind. This can be understood as being essentially an ideological strategy aimed at showing that reform can come only through a gradual process of education and enlightenment. In keeping with his opinion of the reformist movement of the time, it also entailed a direct attack on violent revolution as a viable path to change that, he believed, harbored the seeds of its own ineffectiveness. This concern with gradualism and realism was also evident in wider aspects of his thought I shall now consider.

“Things as They Are”: Gradualism and Realism

This section addresses the development of Godwin’s ideas in the 1790s in three spheres of personal activity—cultural, political, and social. In drawing attention to the gradualist and realist dimensions of this evolution, these insights can also be seen to supplement the central argument I am pursuing regarding the increasing import of politeness in Godwin’s antiauthoritarian thought.

Fiction and Philosophy

Some of the developments in Godwin’s literary and cultural life highlighted the emphasis on experience over abstract speculation and recourse to feeling over reason that had entered into his thought. They also tie in with the shift, exemplified in the increased receptivity to “polite” virtue I have discussed, to a cultural, rather than overtly political, mode of critique as the site of his radical agenda for liberty.

In May 1794 Godwin published what was to become his most enduring and critically acclaimed novel, little more than a year after Political Justice had witnessed his dramatic rise to fame. He wrote of Caleb Williams: “What is now presented to the public, is no refined and abstract speculation; it is a study and delineation of things passing in the moral world.” 123 Caleb Williams was a pioneering work of political fiction as well as an innovative psychological novel. In these respects, it lay at the crossroads between the
cold rationalism expounded in Political Justice and the focus on the inner self that was to inform the Romantics and is equally revealing of both tensions in the development of Godwin’s thought.

Though much has been written on the relative political and psychological significance of the novel, there are two related aspects of note, in particular, pertinent to the present argument. The first is the innovative subjective mode of writing that takes the first-person viewpoint of the character as the novel’s narrative. As Godwin was to write of his approach to Caleb Williams in the preface to the second edition of his later novel, Fleetwood (1805, 1832), “I began my narrative, as is the more usual way, in the first person. But I speedily became dissatisfied. I then assumed the first person, making the hero of my tale his own historian.” This was suggestive of the later shift toward a more relativist stance in Godwin’s approach to knowledge and the greater emphasis given to the role of sentiment in shaping action. The second, notwithstanding the obverse implication of drawing attention to the importance of human agency, is the recognition of the external, “real world,” constraints that impinge on and shape individual development and the possibilities for reform. This latter point is a factor that becomes more pronounced during the decade. As Pamela Clemit has argued, “after the mid-1790s, his increased attention to the inner lives of individuals reflects the gradualist theory of political progress which is central to his influence on younger writers.” More broadly, seen as a work of political fiction, Caleb Williams also indicated that Godwin was using the literary form—itself a more “polite” vehicle than the pamphlet or philosophical treatise—as a vehicle for political critique with a more expansive reach. Indeed, in his, originally suppressed, preface to Caleb Williams, he pointed to this with clarity, stating that “it is now known to philosophers, that the spirit and character of the government intrudes itself into every rank of society. But this is a truth, highly worthy to be communicated, to persons, whom books of philosophy and science are never likely to reach.”

The relationship between Godwin’s novels and his philosophy suggest that there was no clear boundary between “fiction” and “reason” and can be seen in light of the concurrent shift toward sentiment in his novels and in his revisions to Political Justice. In the preface to St Leon, published in 1799, Godwin stated this change of opinion regarding the private affections and his move away from the rationalism of the first edition of Political Justice. It also stands as an important insight into his general conception of the coherence and consistency of his own varied writings:

All I think it necessary to say on the present occasion is, that, for more than four years, I have been anxious for opportunity and leisure to modify some of the earlier chapters of that work in conformity to the sentiments
inculcated in this. Not that I see cause to make any change respecting the principle of justice, or any thing else fundamental to the system there delivered; but that I apprehend domestic and private affections inseparable from the nature of man, and from what may be styled the culture of the heart, and am fully persuaded that they are not incompatible with a profound and active sense of justice in the mind of him that cherishes them. 127

Thus, as with Caleb Williams, St Leon was inextricably implicated in and reflective of Godwin’s underlying philosophical concerns and the novel was, in this sense, as much a window on them as a departure into a purely imaginative realm: although, at the same time, the role of the imagination embodied in fiction was conceived by Godwin as a sphere of freedom, and fiction was, in this way, tied to liberty. St Leon further suggested that Godwin viewed his works—the overtly political and philosophical, as well as the literary—in a holistic manner. His assertion that he saw no change regarding “anything else fundamental to the system there delivered” suggests that he understood his deeper philosophical commitments as being transmuted, taking on different forms, rather than being displaced outright. Despite his changes, therefore, he also stressed the underlying integrity and continuities in his thought.

In an essay entitled “Of History and Romance” written in the same year as The Enquirer, Godwin discussed the connection between fiction and historiography. It further indicated his move away from a grand sweeping interpretation of the world and toward a focus on the particulars of individual experience and can also be seen as a reflection of the underlying shift in his wider writings. In it, he stressed attention to the “wisdom of studying in detail,” in particularities, not generalities. 128 In this regard, Butler and Philp have argued that Godwin’s account of his literary, political, and historical methods “allows us to see much of his later writing and all of the later novels, as versions of this kind of philosophical history—less formal, but no less serious, than Political Justice; more literary in form, but still fundamentally political in intent.” 129

Echoing the role of sentiment in politeness, the accent on feeling and the domestic affections was also demonstrated in the private life stemming from Godwin’s literary circles, most notably in his short-lived, but intense and intimate, relationship with Mary Wollstonecraft. On March 29, 1797, after a brief courtship over the previous months, Godwin married Wollstonecraft, though they continued to live separately preserving their professional independence. He had first met her over dinner with Tom Paine in 1791, though neither of them had pursued their acquaintance further. She was pregnant
with their child, Mary, at the time of the marriage and died in September, soon after giving birth to her. Godwin who had found a surprising degree of contentment in the domestic life was overcome with grief and almost immediately set to work to publish her memoirs that, in their treatment of her unconventional sexual mores, caused a scandal.  

At the time, as the tide of loyalist reaction had risen decisively and along with it a conservative and moralistic press, Godwin became a main target of criticism directed at the pernicious laxity of the so-called new morality. The marriage, which had contradicted Godwin’s earlier statements in the first edition of Political Justice on the ills of the institution for the benefits of personal independence, and the clearly passionate and heartfelt publication of the memoirs had also shown that Godwin was further acknowledging the importance of feeling over reason in determining human action. In the memoirs, Godwin had also recognized Wollstonecraft’s personal and intellectual debt to him in his admiration of her work, Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark (1796). He wrote of it: “If ever there was a book calculated to make a man in love with its author, this appears to me the book. She speaks of her sorrows, in a way that fills us with melancholy, and dissolves us in tenderness, at the same time that she displays a genius which commands all our admiration.”

Gary Kelly has noted that Wollstonecraft’s influence can also be understood in regard to Godwin’s increasing interest in “taste,” the sublime and the picturesque, pointing to the import of his aesthetic sensibilities. As he has observed, “Godwin made a systematic study of the literature on this subject… Mary Wollstonecraft then revived his interest in the subject… In all of her work she had developed a profound awareness of the civilizing effect of sublime and beautiful nature, culminating in the Letters from Norway… Her influence clearly helped Godwin to proceed in new directions of taste and aesthetic theory.” Entries in Godwin’s own journal show a sustained interest in taste and aesthetics preceding his relationship with Wollstonecraft, though following the original publication of Political Justice.

Political Justice and Political Action

As well as being a year of notable literary acclaim through the publication of Caleb Williams, the year 1794 also signalled Godwin’s decisive entry into the political fray. Philp has linked the seeming disparity between Godwin’s radical philosophical writings and his rather more cautious political activism to the logic of his anarchism.
Notwithstanding Godwin’s philosophical anarchism, his practical position remained, in general, cautious and gradualist. Indeed, it is because his anarchism was rooted in an indefeasible commitment to the sanctity of private judgment that he consistently refused to endorse attempts to achieve political change by force of numbers rather than force of argument.\textsuperscript{134}

Godwin’s criticism of political associations can be seen in terms of his view of the actually existing public sphere in which he feared the dangers of heated demagogic speeches in stifling individual rational judgment. Andrew McCann has drawn attention to this paradox in Godwin’s conception of the public, pointing out his “contradictory attempts to rethink the public sphere as the locus of political amelioration.”\textsuperscript{135} McCann identifies this paradox through Godwin’s “simultaneous valorization of public interaction as the basis of rational social and political life, and his fear of it as a domain of mass manipulation.”\textsuperscript{136} This unease with mass manipulation was also exemplified in Godwin’s relationship with his close friend, the radical, John Thelwall, which provides an insight into the growing tension between Godwin’s conception of the path to radical reform and the form it took in the populist mass appeal of Thelwall.\textsuperscript{137}

Thelwall’s disagreement with Godwin over the merits of revolutionary change through popular agitation and direct action was evidence of Godwin’s gradualist position and was to become more pronounced as a consequence of Godwin’s balanced criticisms of both the government and radicals in his \textit{Considerations} of 1795. Godwin’s refusal to visit Thelwall while he was awaiting trial in the Tower only served to exacerbate this tension. Notwithstanding his caution in the face of Thelwall’s tactics, however, Godwin was far from politically docile and in the years 1794–1795 launched a direct assault on Pitt’s strong-armed policies toward the radicals in two anonymously authored pamphlets that were calculated to have a direct political impact—\textit{Cursory Strictures} and \textit{Considerations on Lord Grenville’s and Mr Pitt’s Bills}.

Appearing in the \textit{Morning Chronicle} on October 21, 1794, Godwin’s \textit{Cursory Strictures} were a response to the charges presented by Lord Chief Justice Eyre to the Grand Jury in regard to the treason trials at which Thelwall, along with most of the other leading members of the London Corresponding Society (LCS) and Society for Constitutional Information (SCI), were being held.\textsuperscript{138} The immediate context for the arrests was government fear that the establishment of alternative radical associations and conventions posed an institutional threat to the legitimacy of parliament. The charge was based on the statute of treason of 1352 where “High Treason” was defined as “to
compass or imagine the Death of the King.”

Godwin meticulously proceeded to effectively dismantle the grounds of Eyre’s argument by focusing on his unwarranted claim to connect the activities of the radicals within the definition of treasonable offenses that Godwin termed “his newfangled treason.” In contesting Eyre, he asserted that “an attempt to procure a Reform in the Commons’ House of Parliament, through the medium of associations and Conventions, is not a conspiracy to subvert the Monarchy.” He consequently dismissed Eyre’s claims and his method as a “profusion of fiction, hypothesis, and prejudice.”

In countering the government’s attacks with his own calm, considered riposte, Godwin had pressed into action his gradualist take on radical strategy in the face of the reality of state powers and, to the extent his pamphlet was seen to be effective, had been quietly vindicated. In the following year, the government heightened its clampdown on radicalism by introducing two bills widely known as the “Gagging Acts” or “Two Acts” and the suspension of habeas corpus. In response, Godwin published his Considerations on November 21, 1795 signed, tellingly, by “A Lover of Order.” In it, Godwin positioned himself against both Pitt’s repression and Thelwall’s radical agitation. He cautioned against what he saw as destructive revolutionary change and counselled prudence and gradual reform. “We must not, for the sake of a problematical future,” he argued, “part with the advantages we already possess; we must not destroy, faster than we rear.” He turned his attack on the radical political associations such as the LCS noting with concern that “the speeches delivered at these meetings, and the resolutions adopted, have not always been of the most temperate kind.” In keeping with his views on the danger of mass manipulation and the nature of radical agitation, he continued, “it is not, for the most part, in crowded audiences, that truth is successfully investigated, and the principles of science luminously conceived.”

Notably, Godwin couched his response in the language of the loyalist establishment, tying his critique to a defense of the “liberties of Englishmen” and “Bill of Rights” and their violation by Pitt’s legislation. In appropriating this loyalist idiom, Godwin was grounding his radical contestation with reference to “1688” and English liberties rather than Paineite universals. This recourse to a cultural and historical parochialism is given greater force in his pronouncement that “we must both accommodate ourselves to the empire of old prejudices, and to the strong and decisive influx of new opinions.”

An aspect that has not previously been noted is that the seeds of Godwin’s growing receptivity to politeness were arguably also evident in his mid-decade pamphlet. This can be understood in relation to Godwin’s critique of certain forms of rhetorical speech that tended to act as authoritative
pronouncements and incite blind obedience. As he stated, “all oratorical sea-
soning is an appeal to the passions.” For Godwin, such forms of discourse
ran counter to the requirements of private judgment and intellectual free-
dom in imposing upon individuals a “uniformity of opinion.” Here again,
he stressed the prospective nature of enquiry:

The idea of combining uniformity of opinion in the sequel, with lib-
erty of enquiry in the commencement, is the most impossible and frantic
notion that ever entered into the mind of man.

Godwin went on to discuss, more explicitly, the “civilizing” effects of appro-
priately refined “conversation” asserting an early distinction between the
brutish and the polite:

It is not upon common conversation, but upon science and the art of
writing, that all that is dignified, all that is ennobling, all that is exquisite
and admirable in human nature, depends. Brutes have a sort of com-
mon conversation; and, if we had nothing higher to depend upon for our
welfare but common conversation, we should speedily degenerate into a
species of brutes.

Considerations thus not only reflected Godwin’s gradualism and realism in
defending radicalism in the face of political events, but also tied them, ten-
tatively, to polite discourse. If discussion was to displace violent agitation as
the prime medium for reform, Godwin appeared to be recognizing that it
needed to be a more robust and grounded proposition than simply an exercise
in utopian, moralistic reasoning or a cloud of heated rhetoric. Godwin him-
self had, for a time, been a member of the debating club, the Philomathean
Society, which, O’Shaughnessy has argued, he left, in part, due to what he
perceived as its increasing shift away from rational debate.

Polite Dissent
The influence of religious Dissent on Godwin is most commonly associ-
ated with an understanding of the vital place accorded to private judgment
and sincerity in his thought. As discussed earlier, these principles had been
instilled into him from an early age as a pupil of Samuel Newton and a stu-
dent at Hoxton Academy and also through his friends, acquaintances, social
and professional circles. Indeed, it has been argued, the Dissenting interest
constituted the main influence on his political philosophy at the time of
writing Political Justice.
While acknowledging the centrality of private judgment and sincerity, the influence of Dissenting circles on Godwin, I would argue, was, however, also multidimensional and evolving. As with the ambivalence present within the civic humanist tradition that Klein’s reading of Shaftesbury exemplified, Dissent also harbored the potential for both simplicity and sophistication. To see the Dissenters primarily, if not solely, in terms of their internalized principles is to risk neglecting their dynamic and symbiotic role in shaping and accommodating to the wider social and political changes that were taking place in late-eighteenth-century Britain. Central to this was the emergence of a “polite and commercial” society and, in particular, the middle orders, of which the Dissenters were an integral part. As John Brewer has noted in regard to the reformers of the 1760s and 1770s, “the concern of the middling sort was not a return to a bucolic cloud-cuckoo-land but the reduction of business risk and the harnessing of new economic forces in the society.”

In the late-eighteenth century, this observation remained broadly applicable to the interests of this sector of society despite the intervening impact of revolution in France. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Priestley was a paradigmatic example of this. In this regard, politeness can be tied to the influence of Dissenting social circles on Godwin in two related ways: first, as the idiom that best reflected the self-image with which Godwin’s target audience and his social milieu increasingly associated themselves; and second, as underpinning a rhetorical shift in strategy on the part of Godwin in response to the effects of the underlying functions of commerce and the ascendancy of loyalism toward the mid- to late-decade on this constituency. The interchange between Dissent and the broader literary and cultural radical elite that increasingly made up a portion of Godwin’s social milieu represented a further fusion of the cultural and the commercial.

In institutional terms, Dissenters had been locked in a battle with the Anglican establishment for rights and recognition since the passing of the Act of Uniformity of 1662 that defined the religious dimensions of the Restoration settlement. This had led to the mass ejection of those ministers, schoolteachers, and dons who did not accept the Book of Common Prayer and signaled the beginning of the “Dissenting interest” in British politics. Other legislative developments also placed further constraints on the Dissenters. The Corporation Act of 1661, for example, had made membership of municipal bodies dependent on taking communion in the Established Church and the Conventicle Act of 1664 put restrictions on religious gatherings other than those of the Anglican Church. By the late-eighteenth century there had been growing efforts to campaign against discrimination of the Test and Corporation Acts and the Dissenters represented an important, if diverse, social, economic, and political force.
The influence of Dissent was partly due to the social and economic status of the Dissenting elite, many of whom were wealthy merchants with significant commercial and business interests. They were, in this regard, emblematic of the emergent middle “class” in the eighteenth century. As John Seed has argued, it was the *haute bourgeoisie* of Rational Dissenters that “was decisive in shaping the culture of Rational Dissent. It was their pew rents and donations that maintained the chapel and paid the minister’s stipend. They generally constituted a self-selecting oligarchy of trustees, appointing the minister and, with the families, sitting in judgment on his preaching.”

The social ethos of the ruling elite of Dissenters, however, had dual, if not contradictory, implications: on the one hand, it exhorted the laboring poor to industry and frugality and, on the other, it was itself engaged in the trappings of polite and refined society. It was on this latter dimension that the receding fortunes of radicalism and the cultural development of Godwin’s political thought converged.

By the mid-1790s many radicals had largely withdrawn from the political arena under the weight of government repression and the ascendant loyalist campaign that deftly exploited the context of war with France, deteriorating political developments there and the dangers homegrown “Jacobinism” posed to the venerated Constitution. Despite these external pressures, Paineite egalitarianism and recourse to natural rights did not necessarily have great appeal to the Dissenting elite who were themselves commercial, if not propertied, gentlemen. Godwin would likely have been aware that any appeal to his core target audience of the radical elite, which included an evolving Dissenting tradition that had exercised such a central influence on him in his formative intellectual years, would need to be responsive to their increasingly cultivated, refined, and commercial self-image as well as to the failures of the movement. In this respect, a move toward a polite idiom represented a more gradualist and realist approach. Godwin acknowledged his own complicity in the heady days of enthusiasm for the Revolution confessing in *The Enquirer* that “he did not escape the contagion.” In doing so, he also recognized his own place among the now more temperate ranks of radicalism in the changed climate, stating, “those who ranged themselves as the same party, have now moderated their intemperance, and (he) has accompanied them also in their present stage.”

The departure from a stringent moralism intimated at the gravitation toward the more permissive agenda of the “new morality” with which, as discussed earlier, Godwin had been tainted by his conservative detractors, particularly since his publication of Wollstonecraft’s memoirs. These developments can also be understood in relation to attitudes to the ever-present issue of luxury. Thus while the puritanical roots of Dissent appeared at odds
with the ostentation implied by luxury, they were not necessarily in tension with the upwardly mobile, cultivated, and refined self-image of many of the Dissenting elite. Indeed, the “rational” dimension of luxury alluded to earlier that Godwin associated with the accomplishments of culture, of arts and letters, was also arguably a natural outgrowth of a fundamental tenet of Dissent—the primacy accorded to the development of intellectual cultivation, independence, and freedom.

While offering an alternative historical reading of Godwin’s thought, the wider purpose of the chapter has been to explore the intellectual space this opens up for thinking about international anarchy by a focus on the relationship between the dual ideas of politeness and anarchism. In this regard, it has explored the implications of this juxtaposition of ideas with a view to its relevance to contemporary international theory. I will return to these ideas in my construction of the idea of polite anarchy—drawn from this skeptical account of Godwin’s antiauthoritarian thought—in the treatment of anarchist international theory and diplomacy in Chapter 6. Polite anarchy can be understood as being a construct that lays only basic claims to having its intellectual roots in a historical appreciation of Godwin’s thought. I would argue, however, that the tendencies manifested in Godwin’s life and thought in my discussion above suggest that his antiauthoritarian commitments ran concurrently with his growing receptivity to the idiom of politeness at this time. Moreover, throughout his varied writings his radical antiauthoritarian project displayed a degree of overall integrity.

Before moving to my own reconstruction and application of some of these ideas to IR in Chapter 6, the next chapter will address Godwin’s international thought in light of the interpretation of his political thought that I have presented here. It serves a dual purpose: on the one hand, it aims to explore an aspect of Godwin’s thought that has not before been addressed in discrete terms and, therefore, introduce him as an international thinker, drawing, in part, on some hitherto unpublished manuscript sources; and, on the other, it investigates the degree to which the polite skepticism that permeated his anarchist thought that I have discussed here entered into his views on international relations.