

Landesbibliothek Oldenburg

Digitalisierung von Drucken

Sketches Of The History Of Man

In Two Volumes

Home, Henry

Edinburgh, 1774

Sketch III. Progress of men with respect to property.

urn:nbn:de:gbv:45:1-945

S K E T C H III.

Progress of Men with respect to PROPERTY.

AMong the senses inherent in the nature of man, the sense of property is eminent. By this sense wild animals caught by labour or art, are perceived to belong to the hunter or fisher; they become his *property*. This sense is the foundation of *meum et tuum*, a distinction of which no human being is ignorant. In the shepherd-state, there is the same perception of property with respect to wild animals tamed for use, and also with respect to their progeny. It takes place also with respect to a field separated from the common, and cultivated by a man for bread to himself and family (a).

The sense of property is slower in its growth toward maturity than the external senses, which are perfect even in childhood; but ripens faster than the sense of congruity, of symmetry, of dignity, of grace, and other delicate senses, which scarce make any figure till we become men. Children discover a sense of property in distinguishing their own chair, and their own spoon. In them however it is faint and obscure, requiring time to bring it to perfection. The gradual progress of that sense, from its infancy among savages to its maturity among polished nations, is one of the most entertaining articles that belong to the present undertaking. But as that article makes a part of Historical

(a) See Principles of Morality and Natural Religion, p. 77. edit. 2.

law-



law-tracts (*a*), nothing remains for me but a few gleanings.

Man is by nature a hoarding animal, having an appetite for storing up things of use; and the sense of property is bestow'd on men, for securing to them what they thus store up. Hence it appears, that things provided by Providence for our sustenance and accommodation, were not intended to be possessed in common; and probably in the earliest ages every man separately hunted for himself and his family. But chance prevails in that occupation; and it may frequently happen, that while some get more than enough, others must go supperless to bed. Sensible of that inconvenience, it crept into practice, for hunting and fishing to be carried on in common *. We find accordingly the practice of hunting and fishing in common, even among gross savages. Those of New Holland, above mentioned, live upon small fish dug out of the sand when the sea retires. Sometimes they get plenty,

* Inequalities of chance, which are great in a few instances, vanish almost entirely when the operation is frequently reiterated during a course of time. Did every man's subsistence depend on the fruits of his own field, many would die of hunger, while others wallowed in plenty. Barter and commerce among the inhabitants of a district, lessen the hazard of famine: the commerce of corn through a large kingdom, such as France or Britain, lessens it still more: extend that commerce through Europe, through the world, and there will remain scarce a vestige of the inequalities of chance: the crop of corn may fail in one province, or in one kingdom; but that it should fail universally is beyond the varieties of chance. The same observation holds in every other matter of chance: one's gain or loss at game for a night, for a week, may be considerable; but carry on the game for a year, and so little of chance remains, that it is almost the same whether one play for a guinea or for twenty. Hence a skilful insurer never ventures much upon one bottom; but multiplies his bargains as much as possible: the more bargains he is engaged in, the greater is the probability of success.

(*a*) Tract 3.

sometimes



sometimes very little; but whether successful or unsuccessful, all is broiled and eat in common. After eating they go to rest: they return to their fishing next ebb of the tide, whether it be day or night, foul or fair; for go they must, or starve. In small tribes, where patriotism is vigorous, or in a country thinly peopled in proportion to its fertility, the living in common is extremely comfortable: but in a large state where selfishness prevails, or in any state where great population requires extraordinary culture, the best method is to allow every man to shift for himself and his family: men wish to labour for themselves; and they labour more ardently for themselves than for the public. Private property became more and more sacred in the progress of arts and manufactures: to allow an artist of superior talents no profit above others, would be a sad discouragement to industry, and be scarce consistent with common justice.

The sense of property is not confined to the human species. The beavers perceive the timber they store up for food, to be their property; and the bees seem to have the same perception with respect to their winter's provision of honey. Sheep know when they are in a trespass, and run to their own pasture on the first glimpse of a man. Monkeys do the same when detected in robbing an orchard. Sheep and horned cattle have a sense of property with respect to their resting-place in a fold or inclosure, which every one guards against the incroachment of others. He must be a sceptic indeed who denies that perception to rooks: thieves there are among them as among men; but if a rook purloin a stick from another's nest, a council is held, much chattering ensues, and the *lex talionis* is applied, by demolishing the nest of the criminal. To man are furnished rude materials only: to convert these into food and cloathing requires industry; and if he had not a sense that the product of his labour belongs to himself, his industry would be extremely faint. In general,
it



it is pleasant to observe, that the sense of property is always given where it is useful, and never but where it is useful.

An ingenious writer, describing the inhabitants of Guiana, who continue hunters and fishers, makes an eloquent harangue upon the happiness they enjoy, in having few wants and desires, and in having very little notion of private property. “ The manners of
“ these Indians exhibit an amiable picture of primeval innocence
“ and happiness. The ease with which their few wants are supplied, renders division of land unnecessary; nor does it afford
“ any temptation to fraud or violence. That proneness to vice,
“ which among civilized nations is esteemed a propensity of nature, has no existence in a country where every man enjoys in
“ perfection his native freedom and independence, without hurting or being hurt by others. A perfect equality of rank, banishing all distinctions but of age and personal merit, promotes
“ freedom in conversation, and firmness in action; and suggests
“ no desires but what may be gratified with innocence. Envy and
“ discontent cannot subsist with perfect equality; we scarce even
“ hear of a discontented lover, as there is no difference of rank and
“ fortune, the common obstacles that prevent fruition. Those who
“ have been unhappily accustomed to the refinements of luxury,
“ will scarce be able to conceive, that an Indian, with no covering
“ but what modesty requires, with no shelter that deserves the
“ name of a house, and with no food but of the coarsest kind
“ painfully procured by hunting, can feel any happiness: and yet
“ to judge from external appearance, the happiness of these people
“ may be envied by the wealthy of the most refined nations; and
“ justly; because their ignorance of extravagant desires, and endless pursuits that torment the great world, excludes every wish
“ beyond the present. In a word, the inhabitants of Guiana are
“ an example of what Socrates justly observes, that those who
“ want the least, approach the nearest to the gods, who want
“ nothing.”



“ nothing.” It must be acknowledged, that the innocence of savages, here painted in fine colours, is in every respect more amiable than the luxury of opulent cities, where sensuality and selfishness are ruling passions. But is our author unacquainted with a middle state between the two extremes, more suitable than either to the dignity of human nature? The appetite for property is not bestow'd upon us in vain: it has given birth to many useful arts, and to almost all the fine arts; it is still more useful in furnishing opportunity for gratifying the most dignified natural affections; for without private property, what place would there be for benevolence or charity (a)? Without private property, there would be no industry; and without industry, men would remain savages for ever.

The appetite for property, in its nature a great blessing, degenerates, I acknowledge, into a great curse when it transgresses the bounds of moderation. Before money was introduced, the appetite seldom was immoderate, because plain necessaries were its only objects. But money is a species of property, of such extensive use as greatly to inflame the appetite. Money prompts men to be industrious; and the beautiful productions of industry and art, rousing the imagination, excite a violent desire of fine houses, ornamented gardens, and of every thing gay and splendid. Habitual wants multiply: luxury and sensuality gain ground: the appetite for property becomes headstrong, and must be gratified even at the expence of justice and honour. Examples are without number of this progress; and yet the following history deserves to be kept in memory, as a striking and lamentable illustration. Hispaniola was that part of America which Columbus first discovered *anno* 1497. He landed upon the territory of

(a) Historical law-tracts, tract 3.



Guacanaric, one of the principal Cacics of the island. That prince, who had nothing barbarous in his manners, received his guests with cordiality; and encouraged his people to vie with one another in obliging them. To gratify the Spanish appetite for gold, they parted freely with their richest ornaments; and in return, were satisfied with glass beads, and such baubles. The Admiral's ship having been tossed against the rocks in a hurricane, Guacanaric was not wanting to his friend on that occasion: he convened a number of men to assist in unloading the ship; and attended himself till the cargo was safely lodged in a magazine. The Admiral having occasion to return to Spain, left a part of his crew behind; who, forgetting the lessons of moderation he had taught them, turned licentious. The remonstrances of Guacanaric were in vain: they seized upon the gold and wives of the Indians; and in general treated them with great cruelty. Such enormities did not long pass unrepented: the rapacious Spaniards, after much bloodshed, were shut up in their fort, and reduced to extremity. Unhappily a reinforcement arrived from Spain: a long and bloody war ensued, which did not end till the islanders were wholly brought under. Of this island, about 200 leagues in length and between sixty and eighty in breadth, a Spanish historian bears witness, that the inhabitants amounted to a million when Columbus landed*. The Spaniards, relentless in their cruelty, forc'd these poor people to abandon the culture of their fields, and to retire to the woods and mountains. Hunted like wild beasts even in these retreats, they fled from mountain to mountain, till hunger and fatigue, which destroy'd more than the sword, forc'd them to deliver themselves up to their implacable conquerors.

* As little corn was at that time produced in the island, and less of animal food, there is reason to suspect, that the numbers are exaggerated. But whether a million, or a half of that number, the moral is the same.

There



There remained at that time but 60,000, who were divided among the Spaniards as slaves. Excessive fatigue in the mines, and want of even the common necessaries of life, reduced them in five years to 14,000. Considering them merely as beasts of burden, they would have yielded more profit had they been treated with less inhumanity. Avarice frequently counteracts its own end: by grasping too much, it loses all. The Emperor Charles resolved to apply some effectual remedy; but being interrupted for some time by various avocations, he got intelligence that the poor Indians were totally extirpated. And they were so in reality, a handful excepted, who lay hid in the mountains, and subsisted as by a miracle in the midst of their enemies. That handful were discovered many years after by some hunters; who treated them with humanity, regretting perhaps the barbarity of their forefathers. The poor Indians, docile and submissive, embraced the Christian religion, and assumed by degrees the manners and customs of their masters. They still exist, and live by hunting and fishing.

Affection for property! Janus double-fac'd, productive of many blessings, but degenerating often to be a curse. In thy right hand, Industry, a cornucopia of plenty: in thy left, Avarice, a Pandora's box of deadly poison.

