

**Landesbibliothek Oldenburg**

**Digitalisierung von Drucken**

**An Essay On The History Of Civil Society**

**Ferguson, Adam**

**London, 1767**

Sect. II. Of the principles of Self-preservation.

**urn:nbn:de:gbv:45:1-1517**

tions of men are equally the result of their nature. At most, this language can only refer to the general and prevailing sense or practice of mankind; and the purpose of every important inquiry on this subject may be served by the use of a language equally familiar and more precise. What is just, or unjust? What is happy, or wretched, in the manners of men? What, in their various situations, is favourable or adverse to their amiable qualities? are questions to which we may expect a satisfactory answer; and whatever may have been the original state of our species, it is of more importance to know the condition to which we ourselves should aspire, than that which our ancestors may be supposed to have left.

## S E C T. II.

*Of the principles of Self-preservation.*

**I**F in human nature there are qualities by which it is distinguished from every other part of the animal creation, men are themselves in different climates and in different ages greatly diversified. So far as we are able to account for this diversity on principles either moral or physical, we perform a task of great curiosity or signal utility. It appears necessary, however, that we attend to the universal qualities of our nature, before we regard its varieties, or attempt to explain differences consisting

sisting in the unequal possession or application of dispositions and powers that are in some measure common to all mankind.

MAN, like the other animals, has certain instinctive propensities, which, prior to the perception of pleasure or pain, and prior to the experience of what is pernicious or useful, lead him to perform many functions of nature relative to himself and to his fellow-creatures. He has one set of dispositions which refer to his animal preservation, and to the continuance of his race; another which lead to society, and by inclining him on the side of one tribe or community, frequently engage him in war and contention with the rest of mankind. His powers of discernment, or his intellectual faculties, which, under the appellation of *reason*, are distinguished from the analogous endowments of other animals, refer to the objects around him, either as they are subjects of mere knowledge, or as they are subjects of approbation or censure. He is formed not only to know, but likewise to admire and to contemn; and these proceedings of his mind have a principal reference to his own character, and to that of his fellow-creatures, as being the subjects on which he is chiefly concerned to distinguish what is right from what is wrong. He enjoys his felicity likewise on certain fixed and determinate conditions; and either as an individual apart, or as a member of civil society, must take a particular course in order to reap the advantages of his nature. He is, withal, in a very high degree susceptible of habits; and can, by forbearance or exercise,

cise, so far weaken, confirm, or even diversify his talents, and his dispositions, as to appear, in a great measure, the arbiter of his own rank in nature, and the author of all the varieties which are exhibited in the actual history of his species. The universal characteristics, in the mean time, to which we have now referred, must, when we would treat of any part of this history, constitute the first subject of our attention; and they require not only to be enumerated, but to be distinctly considered.

THE dispositions which refer to the preservation of the individual, while they continue to operate in the manner of instinctive desires, are nearly the same in man that they are in the other animals: but in him they are sooner or later combined with reflection and foresight; they give rise to his apprehensions on the subject of property, and make him acquainted with that object of care which he calls his interest. Without the instincts which teach the beaver and the squirrel, the ant and the bee, to make up their little hoards for winter, at first improvident, and, where no immediate object of passion is near, addicted to sloth, he becomes, in process of time, the great storemaster among animals. He finds in a provision of wealth, which he is probably never to employ, an object of his greatest solicitude, and the principal idol of his mind. He apprehends a relation between his person and his property, which renders what he calls his own in a manner a part of himself, a constituent of his rank, his condition, and his character, in

vo. I. C which,



which, independent of any real enjoyment, he may be fortunate or unhappy; and, independent of any personal merit, he may be an object of consideration or neglect; and in which he may be wounded and injured, while his person is safe, and every want of his nature completely supplied.

IN these apprehensions, while other passions only operate occasionally, the interested find the object of their ordinary cares; their motive to the practice of mechanic and commercial arts; their temptation to trespass on the laws of justice; and, when extremely corrupted, the price of their prostitutions, and the standard of their opinions on the subject of good and of evil. Under this influence, they would enter, if not restrained by the laws of civil society, on a scene of violence or meanness, which would exhibit our species, by turns, under an aspect more terrible and odious, or more vile and contemptible, than that of any animal which inherits the earth.

ALTHOUGH the consideration of interest is founded on the experience of animal wants and desires, its object is not to gratify any particular appetite, but to secure the means of gratifying all; and it imposes frequently a restraint on the very desires from which it arose, more powerful and more severe than those of religion or duty. It arises from the principles of self-preservation in the human frame; but is a corruption, or at least a partial result, of those principles, and is upon many accounts very improperly termed *self-love*.

LOVE

LOVE is an affection which carries the attention of the mind beyond itself, and has a quality, which we call *tenderness*, that never can accompany the considerations of interest. This affection being a complacency and a continued satisfaction in its object, independent of any external event, it has, in the midst of disappointment and sorrow, pleasures and triumphs unknown to those who act without any regard to their fellow-creatures; and in every change of condition, it continues entirely distinct from the sentiments which we feel on the subject of personal success or adversity. But as the care a man entertains for his own interest, and the attention his affection makes him pay to that of another, may have similar effects, the one on his own fortune, the other on that of his friend, we confound the principles from which he acts; we suppose that they are the same in kind, only referred to different objects; and we not only misapply the name of love, in conjunction with self, but, in a manner tending to degrade our nature, we limit the aim of this supposed selfish affection to the securing or accumulating the constituents of interest, or the means of mere animal life.

IT is somewhat remarkable, that notwithstanding men value themselves so much on qualities of the mind, on parts, learning and wit, on courage, generosity, and honour, those men are still supposed to be in the highest degree selfish or attentive to themselves, who are most careful of animal life, and who are least mindful of rendering that life an object worthy of care. It will be dif-



ficult, however, to tell why a good understanding, a resolute and generous mind, should not, by every man in his senses, be reckoned as much parts of himself, as either his stomach or his palate, and much more than his estate or his dress. The epicure, who consults his physician, how he may restore his relish for food, and by creating an appetite, may increase the means of enjoyment, might at least with an equal regard to himself, consult how he might strengthen his affection to a parent or a child, to his country or to mankind; and it is probable that an appetite of this sort would prove a source of enjoyment not less than the former.

By our supposed selfish maxims, notwithstanding, we generally exclude from among the objects of our personal cares, many of the happier and more respectable qualities of human nature. We consider affection and courage as mere follies, that lead us to neglect or expose ourselves; we make wisdom consist in a regard to our interest; and without explaining what interest means, we would have it understood as the only reasonable motive of action with mankind. There is even a system of philosophy founded upon tenets of this sort, and such is our opinion of what men are likely to do upon selfish principles, that we think it must have a tendency very dangerous to virtue. But the errors of this system do not consist so much in general principles, as in their particular applications; not so much in teaching men to regard themselves, as in leading them to forget that their happiest affections, their candour, and their independence



dence of mind, are in reality parts of themselves. And the adversaries of this supposed selfish philosophy, where it makes self-love the ruling passion with mankind, have had reason to find fault, not so much with its general representations of human nature, as with the obtrusion of a mere innovation in language for a discovery in science.

WHEN the vulgar speak of their different motives, they are satisfied with ordinary names, which refer to known and obvious distinctions. Of this kind are the terms *benevolence* and *selfishness*, by which they express their desire of the welfare of others, or the care of their own. The speculative are not always satisfied with this proceeding; they would analyze, as well as enumerate the principles of nature; and the chance is, that, merely to gain the appearance of something new, without any prospect of real advantage, they will disturb the order of vulgar apprehension. In the case before us, they have actually found, that benevolence is no more than a species of self-love; and would oblige us, if possible, to look out for a new set of words, by which we may distinguish the selfishness of the parent when he takes care of his child, from his selfishness when he only takes care of himself. For according to this philosophy, as in both cases he only means to gratify a desire of his own, he is in both cases equally selfish. The term *benevolent*, in the mean time, is not employed to characterise persons who have no desires of their own, but persons whose own desires prompt them to procure the welfare of others. The fact is, that we should need only a fresh supply of language,



guage, instead of that which by this seeming discovery we should have lost, in order to make the reasonings of men proceed as they formerly did. But it is certainly impossible to live and to act with men, without employing different names to distinguish the humane from the cruel, and the benevolent from the selfish.

THESE terms have their equivalents in every tongue; they were invented by men of no refinement, who only meant to express what they distinctly perceived or strongly felt. And if a man of speculation should prove that we are selfish in a sense of his own, it does not follow that we are so in the sense of the vulgar; or, as ordinary men would understand his conclusion, that we are condemned in every instance to act on motives of interest, covetousness, pusillanimity, and cowardice; for such is conceived to be the ordinary import of selfishness in the character of man.

AN affection or passion of any kind is sometimes said to give us an interest in its object; and humanity itself gives an interest in the welfare of mankind. This term *interest*, which commonly implies little more than our regard to property, is sometimes put for utility in general, and this for happiness; infomuch that, under these ambiguities, it is not surprising we are still unable to determine, whether interest is the only motive of human action, and the standard by which to distinguish our good from our ill.

So