An Essay On The History Of Civil Society

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Sect. V. Of Intellectual Powers.

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SECT. V.

Of Intellectual Powers.

MANY attempts have been made to analyze the diſpoſitions which we have now enumerated; but one purpoſe of ſcience, perhaps the moſt important, is ſerved, when the exiſtence of a diſpoſition is eſtabliſhed. We are more concerned in its reality, and in its conſequences, than we are in its origin, or manner of formation.

THE ſame obſervation may be applied to the other powers and faculties of our nature. Their exiſtence and uſe are the principal objects of our ſtudy. Thinking and reaſoning, we ſay, are the operations of ſome faculty; but in what manner the faculties of thought or reaſon remain, when they are not exerted, or by what difference in the frame they are unequal in different perſons, are queſtions which we cannot reſolve. Their operations alone diſcover them: when unapplied, they lie hid even from the perſon to whom they pertain; and their action is ſo much a part of their nature, that the faculty itſelf, in many caſes, is ſcarcely to be diſtinguiſhed from a habit acquired in its frequent exertion.

PERSONS who are occupied with different ſubjects, who act in different ſcenes, generally appear to have different

ferent talents, or at leaſt to have the ſame faculties variouſly formed, and ſuited to different purpoſes. The peculiar genius of nations, as well as of individuals, may in this manner ariſe from the ſtate of their fortunes. And it is proper that we endeavour to find ſome rule, by which to judge of what is admirable in the capacities of men, or fortunate in the application of their faculties, before we venture to paſs a judgement on this branch of their merits, or pretend to meaſure the degree of reſpect they may claim by their different attainments.

To receive the informations of ſenſe, is perhaps the earlieſt function of an animal combined with an intellectual nature; and one great accompliſhment of the living agent conſiſts in the force and ſenſibility of his animal organs. The pleaſures or pains to which he is expoſed from this quarter, conſtitute to him an important difference between the objects which are thus brought to his knowledge; and it concerns him to diſtinguiſh well, before he commits himſelf to the direction of appetite. He muſt ſcrutinize the objects of one ſenſe by the perceptions of another; examine with the eye, before he ventures to touch; and employ every means of obſervation, before he gratifies the appetites of thirſt and of hunger. A diſcernment acquired by experience, becomes a faculty of his mind; and the inferences of thought are ſometimes not to be diſtinguiſhed from the perceptions of ſenſe.

THE objects around us, beſide their ſeparate appearances, have their relations to one another. They ſuggeſt, when compared, what would not occur when they are conſidered apart; they have their effects, and mutual influences; they exhibit, in like circumſtances, ſimilar operations, and uniform conſequences. When we have found and expreſſed the points in which the uniformity of their operations conſiſts, we have aſcertained a phyſical law. Many ſuch laws, and even the moſt important, are known to the vulgar, and occur upon the ſmalleſt degrees of reflection: but others are hid under a ſeeming confuſion, which ordinary talents cannot remove; and are therefore the objects of ſtudy, long obſervation, and ſuperior capacity. The faculties of penetration and judgement, are, by men of buſineſs, as well as of ſcience, employed to unravel intricacies of this ſort; and the degree of ſagacity with which either is endowed, is to be meaſured by the ſucceſs with which they are able to find general rules, applicable to a variety of caſes that ſeemed to have nothing in common, and to diſcover important diſtinctions between ſubjects which the vulgar are apt to confound.

To collect a multiplicity of particulars under general heads, and to refer a variety of operations to their common principle, is the object of ſcience. To do the ſame thing, at leaſt within the range of his active engagements, pertains to the man of pleaſure, or buſineſs: and it would ſeem, that the ſtudious and the active are

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ſo far employed in the ſame taſk, from obſervation and experience, to find the general views under which their objects may be conſidered, and the rules which may be uſefully applied in the detail of their conduct. They do not always apply their talents to different ſubjects; and they ſeem to be diſtinguiſhed chiefly by the unequal reach and variety of their remarks, or by the intentions which they ſeverally have in collecting them.

WHILST men continue to act from appetites and paſſions, leading to the attainment of external ends, they ſeldom quit the view of their objects in detail, to go far in the road of general inquiries. They meaſure the extent of their own abilities, by the promptitude with which they apprehend what is important in every ſubject, and the facility with which they extricate themſelves on every trying occaſion. And theſe, it muſt be confeſſed, to a being who is deſtined to act in the midſt of difficulties, are the proper teſt of capacity and force. The parade of words, and general reaſonings, which ſometimes carry an appearance of ſo much learning and knowledge, are of little avail in the conduct of life. The talents from which they proceed, terminate in mere oſtentation, and are ſeldom connected with that ſuperior diſcernment which the active apply in times of perplexity; much leſs with that intrepidity and force of mind which are required in paſſing through difficult ſcenes.

THE abilities of active men, however, have a variety correſponding to that of the ſubjects on which they are

occupied. A ſagacity applied to external and inanimate nature, forms one ſpecies of capacity; that which is turned to ſociety and human affairs, another. Reputation for parts in any ſcene is equivocal, till we know by what kind of exertion that reputation is gained. That they underſtand well the ſubjects to which they apply, is all that can be ſaid, in commending men of the greateſt abilities: and every department, every profeſſion, would have its great men, if there were not a choice of objects for the underſtanding, and of talents for the mind, as well as of ſentiments for the heart, and of habits for the active character.

THE meaneſt profeſſions, indeed, ſo far ſometimes forget themſelves, or the reſt of mankind, as to arrogate, in commending what is diſtinguiſhed in their own way, every epithet the moſt reſpectable claim as the right of ſuperior abilities. Every mechanic is a great man with the learner, and the humble admirer, in his particular calling; and we can, perhaps, with more aſſurance pronounce what it is that ſhould make a man happy and amiable, than what ſhould make his abilities reſpected, and his genius admired. This, upon a view of the talents themſelves, may perhaps be impoſſible. The effect, however, will point out the rule and the ſtandard of our judgement. To be admired and reſpected, is to have an aſcendant among men. The talents which moſt directly procure that aſcendant, are thoſe which operate on mankind, penetrate their views, prevent their wiſhes, or fruſtrate their deſigns. The ſuperior capacity leads with

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a ſuperior energy, where every individual would go, and ſhews the heſitating and the irreſolute a clear paſſage to the attainment of their ends.

THIS deſcription does not pertain to any particular craft or profeſſion; or perhaps it implies a kind of ability, which the ſeparate application of men to particular callings, only tends to ſuppreſs or to weaken. Where ſhall we find the talents which are fit to act with men in a collective body, if we break that body into parts, and confine the obſervation of each to a ſeparate track?

To act in the view of his fellow-creatures, to produce his mind in public, to give it all the exerciſe of ſentiment and thought, which pertain to man as a member of ſociety, as a friend, or an enemy, ſeems to be the principal calling and occupation of his nature. If he muſt labour, that he may ſubſiſt, he can ſubſiſt for no better purpoſe than the good of mankind; nor can he have better talents than thoſe which qualify him to act with men. Here, indeed, the underſtanding appears to borrow very much from the paſſions; and there is a felicity of conduct in human affairs, in which it is difficult to diſtinguiſh the promptitude of the head from the ardour and ſenſibility of the heart. Where both are united, they conſtitute that ſuperiority of mind, the frequency of which among men, in particular ages and nations, much more than the progreſs they have made in ſpeculation, or in the practice of mechanic and liberal arts, ſhould

determine the rate of their genius, and assign the palm of distinction and honour.

When nations succeed one another in the career of discoveries and inquiries, the last is always the most knowing. Systems of science are gradually formed. The globe itself is traversed by degrees, and the history of every age, when past, is an accession of knowledge to those who succeed. The Romans were more knowing than the Greeks; and every scholar of modern Europe is, in this sense, more learned than the most accomplished person that ever bore either of those celebrated names. But is he on that account their superior?

Men are to be estimated, not from what they know, but from what they are able to perform; from their skill in adapting materials to the several purposes of life; from their vigour and conduct in pursuing the objects of policy, and in finding the expedients of war and national defence. Even in literature, they are to be estimated from the works of their genius, not from the extent of their knowledge. The scene of mere observation was extremely limited in a Grecian republic; and the bustle of an active life appeared inconsistent with study: but there the human mind, notwithstanding, collected its greatest abilities, and received its best informations, in the midst of sweat and of dust.

It is peculiar to modern Europe, to rest so much of the human character on what may be learned in retirement,

tirement, and from the information of books. A juſt admiration of ancient literature, an opinion that human ſentiment, and human reaſon, without this aid, were to have vaniſhed from the ſocieties of men, have led us into the ſhade, where we endeavour to derive from imagination and thought, what is in reality matter of experience and ſentiment: and we endeavour, through the grammar of dead languages, and the channel of commentators, to arrive at the beauties of thought and elocution, which ſprang from the animated ſpirit of ſociety, and were taken from the living impreſſions of an active life. Our attainments are frequently limited to the elements of every ſcience, and ſeldom reach to that enlargement of ability and power which uſeful knowledge ſhould give. Like mathematicians, who ſtudy the Elements of Euclid, but never think of menſuration, we read of ſocieties, but do not propoſe to act with men: we repeat the language of politics, but feel not the ſpirit of nations: we attend to the formalities of a military diſcipline, but know not how to employ numbers of men to obtain any purpoſe by ſtratagem or force.

But for what end, it may ſaid, point out a miſfortune that cannot be remedied? If national affairs called for exertion, the genius of men would awake; but in the receſs of better employment, the time which is beſtowed on ſtudy, if even attended with no other advantage, ſerves to occupy with innocence the hours of leiſure, and ſet bounds to the purſuit of ruinous and frivolous amuſements. From no better reaſon than this,

we employ so many of our early years, under the rod, to acquire what it is not expected we should retain beyond the threshold of the school; and whilst we carry the same frivolous character in our studies that we do in our amusements, the human mind could not suffer more from a contempt of letters, than it does from the false importance which is given to literature, as a business for life, not as a help to our conduct, and the means of forming a character that may be happy in itself, and useful to mankind.

If that time which is passed in relaxing the powers of the mind, and in with-holding every object but what tends to weaken and to corrupt, were employed in fortifying those powers, and in teaching the mind to recognise its objects, and its strength, we should not, at the years of maturity, be so much at a loss for occupation; nor, in attending the chances of a gaming-table, misemploy our talents, or waste the fire which remains in the breast. They, at least, who by their stations have a share in the government of their country, might believe themselves capable of business; and while the state had its armies and councils, might find objects enough to amuse, without throwing a personal fortune into hazard, merely to cure the yawnings of a listless and insignificant life. It is impossible for ever to maintain the tone of speculation; it is impossible not sometimes to feel that we live among men.

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