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An Essay On The History Of Civil Society

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Sect. VI. Of Moral Sentiment.

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S E C T. VI.

Of Moral Sentiment.

UPON a slight observation of what passes in human life, we should be apt to conclude, that the care of subsistence is the principal spring of human actions. This consideration leads to the invention and practice of mechanical arts; it serves to distinguish amusement from business; and, with many, scarcely admits into competition any other subject of pursuit or attention. The mighty advantages of property and fortune, when stripped of the recommendations they derive from vanity, or the more serious regards to independence and power, only mean a provision that is made for animal enjoyment; and if our sollicitude on this subject were removed, not only the toils of the mechanic, but the studies of the learned, would cease; every department of public business would become unnecessary; every senate-house would be shut up, and every palace deserted.

Is man therefore, in respect to his object, to be classed with the mere brutes, and only to be distinguished by faculties that qualify him to multiply contrivances for the support and convenience of animal life, and by the extent of a fancy that renders the care of animal preservation to him more burdensome than it is to the herd with which he shares in the bounty of nature? If this
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were his case, the joy which attends on success, or the griefs which arise from disappointment, would make the sum of his passions. The torrent that wasted, or the inundation that enriched his possessions, would give him all the emotion with which he is seized, on the occasion of a wrong by which his fortunes are impaired, or of a benefit by which they are preserved and enlarged. His fellow-creatures would be considered merely as they affected his interest. Profit or loss would serve to mark the event of every transaction; and the epithets *useful* or *detrimental* would serve to distinguish his mates in society, as they do the tree which bears plenty of fruit, from that which serves only to cumber the ground, or intercept his view.

THIS, however, is not the history of our species. What comes from a fellow-creature is received with peculiar attention; and every language abounds with terms that express somewhat in the transactions of men, different from success and disappointment. The bosom kindles in company, while the point of interest in view has nothing to inflame; and a matter frivolous in itself, becomes important, when it serves to bring to light the intentions and characters of men. The foreigner, who believed that Othello, on the stage, was enraged for the loss of his handkerchief, was not more mistaken, than the reasoner who imputes any of the more vehement passions of men to the impressions of mere profit or loss.

MEN



MEN assemble to deliberate on business; they separate from jealousies of interest; but in their several collisions, whether as friends or as enemies, a fire is struck out which the regards to interest or safety cannot confine. The value of a favour is not measured when sentiments of kindness are perceived; and the term *misfortune* has but a feeble meaning, when compared to that of *insult* and *wrong*.

As actors or spectators, we are perpetually made to feel the difference of human conduct, and from a bare recital of transactions which have passed in ages and countries remote from our own, are moved with admiration and pity, or transported with indignation and rage. Our sensibility on this subject gives their charm, in retirement, to the relations of history, and to the fictions of poetry; sends forth the tear of compassion, gives to the blood its briskest movement, and to the eye its liveliest glances of displeasure or joy. It turns human life into an interesting spectacle, and perpetually solicits even the indolent to mix, as opponents or friends, in the scenes which are acted before them. Joined to the powers of deliberation and reason, it constitutes the basis of a moral nature; and whilst it dictates the terms of praise and of blame, serves to class our fellow-creatures by the most admirable and engaging, or the most odious and contemptible, denominations.

IT is pleasant to find men, who, in their speculations, deny the reality of moral distinctions, forget in detail the

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general positions they maintain, and give loose to ridicule, indignation, and scorn, as if any of these sentiments could have place, were the actions of men indifferent; and with acrimony pretend to detect the fraud by which moral restraints have been imposed, as if to censure a fraud were not already to take a part on the side of morality*.

CAN we explain the principles upon which mankind adjudge the preference of characters, and upon which they indulge such vehement emotions of admiration or contempt? If it be admitted that we cannot, are the facts less true? or must we suspend the movements of the heart until they who are employed in framing systems of science have discovered the principle from which those movements proceed? If a finger burn, we care not for information on the properties of fire: if the heart be torn, or the mind overjoyed, we have not leisure for speculations on the subject of moral sensibility.

IT is fortunate in this, as in other articles to which speculation and theory are applied, that nature proceeds in her course, whilst the curious are busied in the search of her principles. The peasant, or the child, can reason, and judge, and speak his language, with a discernment, a consistency, and a regard to analogy, which perplex the logician, the moralist, and the grammarian, when they would find the principle upon which the proceeding

* Mandeville.



is founded, or when they would bring to general rules, what is so familiar, and so well sustained in particular cases. The felicity of our conduct is more owing to the talent we possess for detail, and to the suggestion of particular occasions, than it is to any direction we can find in theory and general speculations.

WE must, in the result of every inquiry, encounter with facts which we cannot explain; and to bear with this mortification would save us frequently a great deal of fruitless trouble. Together with the sense of our existence, we must admit many circumstances which come to our knowledge at the same time, and in the same manner; and which do, in reality, constitute the mode of our being. Every peasant will tell us, that a man hath his rights; and that to trespass on those rights is injustice. If we ask him farther, what he means by the term *right*? we probably force him to substitute a less significant, or less proper term, in the place of this; or require him to account for what is an original mode of his mind, and a sentiment to which he ultimately refers, when he would explain himself upon any particular application of his language.

THE rights of individuals may relate to a variety of subjects, and be comprehended under different heads. Prior to the establishment of property, and the distinction of ranks, men have a right to defend their persons, and to act with freedom; they have a right to maintain the apprehensions of reason, and the feelings of the



heart; and they cannot for a moment converse with one another, without feeling that the part they maintain may be just or unjust. It is not, however, our business here to carry the notion of a right into its several applications, but to reason on the sentiment of favour with which that notion is entertained in the mind.

IF it be true, that men are united by instinct, that they act in society from affections of kindness and friendship; if it be true, that even prior to acquaintance and habitude, men, as such, are commonly to one another objects of attention, and some degree of regard; that while their prosperity is beheld with indifference, their afflictions are considered with commiseration; if calamities be measured by the numbers and the qualities of men they involve; and if every suffering of a fellow-creature draws a croud of attentive spectators; if even in the case of those to whom we do not habitually wish any positive good, we are still averse to be the instruments of harm; it should seem, that in these various appearances of an amicable disposition, the foundations of a moral apprehension are sufficiently laid, and the sense of a right which we maintain for ourselves, is by a movement of humanity and candour extended to our fellow-creatures.

WHAT is it that prompts the tongue when we censure an act of cruelty or oppression? What is it that constitutes our restraint from offences that tend to distress our fellow-creatures? It is probably, in both cases, a particular

particular application of that principle, which, in presence of the sorrowful, sends forth the tear of compassion; and a combination of all those sentiments, which constitute a benevolent disposition; and if not a resolution to do good, at least an aversion to be the instrument of harm*.

IT may be difficult, however, to enumerate the motives of all the censures and commendations which are applied to the actions of men. Even while we moralize, every disposition of the human mind may have its share in forming the judgement, and in prompting the tongue. As jealousy is often the most watchful guardian of chastity, so malice is often the quickest to spy the failings of our neighbour. Envy, affectation, and vanity, may

* Mankind, we are told, are devoted to interest; and this, in all commercial nations, is undoubtedly true: but it does not follow, that they are, by their natural dispositions, averse to society and mutual affection: proofs of the contrary remain, even where interest triumphs most. What must we think of the force of that disposition to compassion, to candour, and goodwill, which, notwithstanding the prevailing opinion that the happiness of a man consists in possessing the greatest possible share of riches, preferments, and honours, still keeps the parties who are in competition for those objects, on a tolerable footing of amity, and leads them to abstain even from their own supposed good, when their seizing it appears in the light of a detriment to others? What might we not expect from the human heart in circumstances which prevented this apprehension on the subject of fortune, or under the influence of an opinion as steady and general as the former, that human felicity does not consist in the indulgences of animal appetite, but in those of a benevolent heart; not in fortune or interest, but in the contempt of this very object, in the courage and freedom which arise from this contempt, joined to a resolute choice of conduct, directed to the good of mankind, or to the good of that particular society to which the party belongs?

dictate



dictate the verdicts we give, and the worst principles of our nature may be at the bottom of our pretended zeal for morality; but if we only mean to inquire, why they who are well disposed to mankind, apprehend, in every instance, certain rights pertaining to their fellow-creatures, and why they applaud the consideration that is paid to those rights, we cannot perhaps assign a better reason, than that the person who applauds, is well disposed to the welfare of the parties to whom his applauses refer.

WHEN we consider, that the reality of any amicable propensity in the human mind has been frequently contested; when we recollect the prevalence of interested competitions, with their attendant passions of jealousy, envy, and malice; it may seem strange to alledge, that love and compassion are the most powerful principles in the human breast: but they are destined, on many occasions, to urge with the most irresistible vehemence; and if the desire of self-preservation be more constant, and more uniform, these are a more plentiful source of enthusiasm, satisfaction, and joy. With a power, not inferior to that of resentment and rage, they hurry the mind into every sacrifice of interest, and bear it undismayed through every hardship and danger.

THE disposition on which friendship is grafted, glows with satisfaction in the hours of tranquillity, and is pleasant, not only in its triumphs, but even in its sorrows. It throws a grace on the external air, and, by its expression

sion on the countenance, compensates for the want of beauty, or gives a charm which no complexion or features can equal. From this source the scenes of human life derive their principal felicity; and their imitations in poetry, their principal ornament. Descriptions of nature, even representations of a vigorous conduct, and a manly courage, do not engage the heart, if they be not mixed with the exhibition of generous sentiments, and the pathetic, which is found to arise in the struggles, the triumphs, or the misfortunes of a tender affection. The death of Polites, in the *Æneid*, is not more affecting than that of many others who perished in the ruins of Troy; but the aged Priam was present when this last of his sons was slain; and the agonies of grief and sorrow force the parent from his retreat, to fall by the hand that shed the blood of his child. The pathetic of Homer consists in exhibiting the force of affections, not in exciting mere terror and pity; passions he has never perhaps, in any instance, attempted to raise.

WITH this tendency to kindle into enthusiasm, with this command over the heart, with the pleasure that attends its emotions, and with all its effects in meriting confidence, and procuring esteem, it is not surprising, that a principle of humanity should give the tone to our commendations and our censures, and even where it is hindered from directing our conduct, should still give to the mind, on reflection, its knowledge of what is desirable in the human character. *What hast thou done with thy brother Abel?* was the first expostulation in behalf of morality;



rality; and if the first answer has been often repeated, mankind have notwithstanding, in one sense, sufficiently acknowledged the charge of their nature. They have felt, they have talked, and even acted, as the keepers of their fellow-creatures: They have made the indications of candour and mutual affection the test of what is meritorious and amiable in the characters of men: They have made cruelty and oppression the principal objects of their indignation and rage: Even while the head is occupied with projects of interest, the heart is often seduced into friendship; and while business proceeds on the maxims of self-preservation, the careless hour is employed in generosity and kindness.

HENCE the rule by which men commonly judge of external actions, is taken from the supposed influence of such actions on the general good. To abstain from harm, is the great law of natural justice; to diffuse happiness is the law of morality; and when we censure the conferring a favour on one or a few at the expence of many, we refer to public utility, as the great object at which the actions of men should be aimed.

AFTER all, it must be confessed, that if a principle of affection to mankind, be the basis of our moral approbation and dislike, we sometimes proceed in distributing applause or censure, without precisely attending to the degree in which our fellow-creatures are hurt or obliged; and that, besides the virtues of candour, friendship, generosity, and public spirit, which bear an immediate
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reference to this principle, there are others which may seem to derive their commendation from a different source. Temperance, prudence, fortitude, are those qualities likewise admired from a principle of regard to our fellow-creatures? Why not, since they render men happy in themselves, and useful to others? He who is qualified to promote the welfare of mankind, is neither a sot, a fool, nor a coward. Can it be more clearly expressed, that temperance, prudence, and fortitude, are necessary to the character we love and admire? I know well why I should wish for them in myself; and why likewise I should wish for them in my friend, and in every person who is an object of my affection. But to what purpose seek for reasons of approbation, where qualities are so necessary to our happiness, and so great a part in the perfection of our nature? We must cease to esteem ourselves, and to distinguish what is excellent, when such qualifications incur our neglect.

A person of an affectionate mind, possessed of a maxim, That he himself, as an individual, is no more than a part of the whole that demands his regard, has found, in that principle, a sufficient foundation for all the virtues; for a contempt of animal pleasures, that would supplant his principal enjoyment; for an equal contempt of danger or pain, that come to stop his pursuits of public good. "A vehement and steady affection magnifies its object, and lessens every difficulty or danger that stands in the way." "Ask those who have
H " been

“ been in love,” says Epictetus, “ they will know that I
“ speak truth.”

“ I have before me,” says another eminent moralist *,
“ an idea of justice, which, if I could follow in every
“ instance, I should think myself the most happy of
“ men.” And it is, perhaps, of consequence to their
happiness, as well as to their conduct, if those can be
disjoined, that men should have this idea properly form-
ed: It is perhaps but another name for that good of
mankind, which the virtuous are engaged to promote.
If virtue be the supreme good, its best and most signal
effect is, to communicate and diffuse itself.

To love, and even to hate, on the apprehension of
moral qualities, to espouse one party from a sense of ju-
stice, to oppose another with indignation excited by ini-
quity, are the common indications of probity, and the
operations of an animated, upright, and generous spirit. To
guard against unjust partialities, and ill-grounded antipa-
thies; to maintain that composure of mind, which, with-
out impairing its sensibility or ardour, proceeds in every
instance with discernment and penetration, are the marks
of a vigorous and cultivated spirit. To be able to follow
the dictates of such a spirit through all the varieties of
human life, and with a mind always master of itself, in
prosperity or adversity, and possessed of all its abilities,
when the subjects in hazard are life, or freedom, as much

* Persian Letters.



as in treating simple questions of interest, are the triumphs of magnanimity, and true elevation of mind. "The event of the day is decided. Draw this javelin from my body now," said Epaminondas, "and let me bleed."

IN what situation, or by what instruction, is this wonderful character to be formed? Is it found in the nurseries of affectation, pertness, and vanity, from which fashion is propagated, and the genteel is announced? in great and opulent cities, where men vie with one another in equipage, dress, and the reputation of fortune? Is it within the admired precincts of a court, where we may learn to smile without being pleased, to care without affection, to wound with the secret weapons of envy and jealousy, and to rest our personal importance on circumstances which we cannot always with honour command? No: but in a situation where the great sentiments of the heart are awakened; where the characters of men, not their situations and fortunes, are the principal distinction; where the anxieties of interest, or vanity, perish in the blaze of more vigorous emotions; and where the human soul, having felt and recognised its objects, like an animal who has tasted the blood of his prey, cannot descend to pursuits that leave its talents and its force unemployed.

PROPER occasions alone operating on a raised and a happy disposition, may produce this admirable effect, whilst mere instruction may always find mankind at a

