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An Essay On The History Of Civil Society

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Sect. II. Of Luxury.

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S E C T. II.

Of Luxury.

WE are far from being agreed on the application of the term *luxury*, or on that degree of its meaning which is consistent with national prosperity, or with the moral rectitude of our nature. It is sometimes employed to signify a manner of life which we think necessary to civilization, and even to happiness. It is, in our panegyric of polished ages, the parent of arts, the support of commerce, and the minister of national greatness, and of opulence. It is, in our censure of degenerate manners, the source of corruption, and the presage of national declension and ruin. It is admired, and it is blamed; it is treated as ornamental and useful; and it is proscribed as a vice.

WITH all this diversity in our judgements, we are generally uniform in employing the term to signify that complicated apparatus which mankind devise for the ease and convenience of life. Their buildings, furniture, equipage, cloathing, train of domestics, refinement of the table, and, in general, all that assemblage which is rather intended to please the fancy, than to obviate real wants, and which is rather ornamental than useful.

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WHEN we are disposed, therefore, under the appellation of *luxury*, to rank the enjoyment of these things among the vices, we either tacitly refer to the habits of sensuality, debauchery, prodigality, vanity, and arrogance, with which the possession of high fortune is sometimes attended; or we apprehend a certain measure of what is necessary to human life, beyond which all enjoyments are supposed to be excessive and vicious. When, on the contrary, luxury is made an article of national lustre and felicity, we only think of it as an innocent consequence of the unequal distribution of wealth, and as a method by which different ranks are rendered mutually dependent, and mutually useful. The poor are made to practise arts, and the rich to reward them. The public itself is made a gainer by what seems to waste its stock, and it receives a perpetual increase of wealth, from the influence of those growing appetites, and delicate tastes, which seem to menace consumption and ruin.

IT is certain, that we must either, together with the commercial arts, suffer their fruits to be enjoyed, and even, in some measure, admired; or, like the Spartans, prohibit the art itself, while we are afraid of its consequences, or while we think that the conveniencies it brings exceed what nature requires.

WE may propose to stop the advancement of arts at any stage of their progress, and still incur the censure of luxury from those who have not advanced so far. The
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house-builder and the carpenter at Sparta were limited to the use of the axe and the saw ; but a Spartan cottage might have passed for a palace in Thrace : and if the dispute were to turn on the knowledge of what is physically necessary to the preservation of human life, as the standard of what is morally lawful, the faculties of physic, as well as of morality, would probably divide on the subject, and leave every individual, as at present, to find some rule for himself. The casuist, for the most part, considers the practice of his own age and condition, as a standard for mankind. If in one age or condition, he condemn the use of a coach, in another he would have no less censured the wearing of shoes ; and the very person who exclaims against the first, would probably not have spared the second, if it had not been already familiar in ages before his own. A censor born in a cottage, and accustomed to sleep upon straw, does not propose that men should return to the woods and the caves for shelter ; he admits the reasonableness and the utility of what is already familiar ; and apprehends an excess and corruption, only in the newest refinement of the rising generation.

THE clergy of Europe have preached successively against every new fashion, and every innovation in dress. The modes of youth are the subject of censure to the old ; and modes of the last age, in their turn, are matter of ridicule to the flippant, and the young. Of this there is not always a better account to be given, than that the old are disposed to be severe, and the young to be merry.



THE argument against many of the conveniencies of life, drawn from the mere consideration of their not being necessary, was equally proper in the mouth of the savage, who dissuaded from the first applications of industry, as it is in that of the moralist, who insists on the vanity of the last. "Our ancestors," he might say, "found their dwelling under this rock; they gathered their food in the forest; they allayed their thirst from the fountain; and they were clothed in the spoils of the beast they had slain. Why should we indulge a false delicacy, or require from the earth fruits which she is not accustomed to yield? The bow of our fathers is already too strong for our arms; and the wild beast begins to lord it in the woods."

THUS the moralist may have found, in the proceedings of every age, those topics of blame, from which he is so much disposed to arraign the manners of his own; and our embarrassment on the subject, is, perhaps, but a part of that general perplexity which we undergo, in trying to define moral characters by external circumstances, which may, or may not, be attended with faults in the mind and the heart. One man finds a vice in the wearing of linen; another does not, unless the fabric be fine: and if, mean-time, it be true, that a person may be dressed in manufacture, either coarse or fine; that he may sleep in the fields, or lodge in a palace; tread upon carpet, or plant his foot on the ground; while the mind either retains, or has lost, its penetration, and its vigour, and the heart its affection to mankind, it is vain, under any such circumstance, to seek for the distinctions
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of virtue and vice, or to tax the polished citizen with weakness for any part of his equipage, or for his wearing a fur, perhaps, in which some savage was dressed before him. Vanity is not distinguished by any peculiar species of dress. It is betrayed by the Indian in the phantastic assortments of his plumes, his shells, his party-coloured furs, and in the time he bestows at the glass and the toilet. Its projects in the woods and in the town are the same: in the one, it seeks, with the visage bedaubed, and with teeth artificially stained, for that admiration, which it courts in the other with a gilded equipage, and liveries of state.

POLISHED nations, in their progress, often come to surpass the rude in moderation, and severity of manners. "The Greeks," says Thucydides, "not long ago, like barbarians, wore golden spangles in the hair, and went armed in times of peace." Simplicity of dress in this people, became a mark of politeness: and the mere materials with which the body is nourished or clothed, are probably of little consequence to any people. We must look for the characters of men in the qualities of the mind, not in the species of their food, or in the mode of their apparel. What are now the ornaments of the grave, and severe; what is owned to be a real convenience, were once the fopperies of youth, or were devised to please the effeminate. The new fashion, indeed, is often the mark of the coxcomb; but we frequently change our fashions, without increasing the measures of our vanity or folly.



ARE the apprehensions of the severe, therefore, in every age, equally groundless and unreasonable? Are we never to dread any error in the article of a refinement bestowed on the means of subsistence, or the conveniences of life? The fact is, that men are perpetually exposed to the commission of error in this article, not merely where they are accustomed to high measures of accommodation, or to any particular species of food, but where-ever these objects, in general, may come to be preferred to friends, to a country, or to mankind; they actually commit such error, where-ever they admire puerile distinctions or frivolous advantages; where-ever they shrink from small inconveniences, and are incapable of discharging their duty with vigour. The use of morality on this subject, is not to limit men to any particular species of lodging, diet, or cloaths; but to prevent their considering these conveniences as the principal objects of human life. And if we are asked, Where the pursuit of trifling accommodations should stop, in order that a man may devote himself entirely to the higher engagements of life? we may answer, That it should stop where it is. This was the rule followed at Sparta: The object of the rule was, to preserve the heart entire for the public, and to occupy men in cultivating their own nature, not in accumulating wealth, and external conveniences. It was not expected otherwise, that the axe or the saw should be attended with greater political advantage, than the plane and the chisel. When Cato walked the streets of Rome without his robe, and without shoes, he did so, most probably, in contempt of what his countrymen were so prone



prone to admire; not in hopes of finding a virtue in one species of dress, or a vice in another.

LUXURY, therefore, considered as a predilection in favour of the objects of vanity, and the costly materials of pleasure, is ruinous to the human character; considered as the mere use of accommodations and conveniences which the age has procured, rather depends on the progress which the mechanical arts have made, and on the degree in which the fortunes of men are unequally parcelled, than on the dispositions of particular men either to vice or to virtue.

DIFFERENT measures of luxury are, however, variously suited to different constitutions of government. The advancement of arts supposes an unequal distribution of fortune; and the means of distinction they bring, serve to render the separation of ranks more sensible. Luxury is, upon this account, apart from all its moral effects, adverse to the form of democratical government; and in any state of society, can be safely admitted in that degree only in which the members of the community are supposed of unequal rank, and constitute public order by means of a regular subordination. High degrees of it appear salutary, and even necessary, in monarchical and mixed governments; where, besides the encouragement to arts and commerce, it serves to give lustre to those hereditary or constitutional dignities which have a place of importance in the political system. Whether even here luxury leads to abuse peculiar to ages of high refinement

