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An Essay On The History Of Civil Society

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Sect. III. Of the Corruption incident to Polished Nations.

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refinement and opulence, we shall proceed to consider in the following sections.

S E C T. III.

Of the Corruption incident to Polished Nations.

LUXURY and corruption are frequently coupled together, and even pass for synonymous terms. But in order to avoid any dispute about words, by the first we may understand that accumulation of wealth, and that refinement on the ways of enjoying it, which are the objects of industry, or the fruits of mechanic and commercial arts: And by the second a real weakness, or depravity of the human character, which may accompany any state of those arts, and be found under any external circumstances or condition whatsoever. It remains to inquire, What are the corruptions incident to polished nations, arrived at certain measures of luxury, and possessed of certain advantages, in which they are generally supposed to excel?

WE need not have recourse to a parallel between the manners of entire nations, in the extremes of civilization and rudeness, in order to be satisfied, that the vices of men are not proportioned to their fortunes; or that the habits of avarice, or of sensuality, are not founded on any certain

certain measures of wealth, or determinate kind of enjoyment. Where the situations of particular men are varied as much by their personal stations, as they can be by the state of national refinements, the same passions for interest, or pleasure, prevail in every condition. They arise from temperament, or an acquired admiration of property; not from any particular manner of life in which the parties are engaged, nor from any particular species of property, which may have occupied their cares and their wishes.

TEMPERANCE and moderation are, at least, as frequent among those whom we call the superior, as they are among the lower classes of men; and however we may affix the character of sobriety to mere cheapness of diet, and other accommodations with which any particular age, or rank of men, appear to be contented, it is well known, that costly materials are not necessary to constitute a debauch, nor profligacy less frequent under the thatched roof, than under the lofty ceiling. Men grow equally familiar with different conditions, receive equal pleasure, and are equally allured to sensuality, in the palace, and in the cave. Their acquiring in either habits of intemperance or sloth, depends on the remission of other pursuits, and on the distaste of the mind to other engagements. If the affections of the heart be awake, and the passions of love, admiration, or anger, be kindled, the costly furniture of the palace, as well as the homely accommodations of the cottage, are neglected: and men, when roused, reject their repose; or, when
wearied,



wearied, embrace it alike on the filken bed, or on the couch of straw.

WE are not, however, from hence to conclude, that luxury, with all its concomitant circumstances, which either serve to favour its increase, or which, in the arrangements of civil society, follow it as consequences, can have no effect to the disadvantage of national manners. If that respite from public dangers and troubles which gives a leisure for the practice of commercial arts, be continued, or increased, into a difuse of national efforts; if the individual, not called to unite with his country, be left to pursue his private advantage; we may find him become effeminate, mercenary, and sensual; not because pleasures and profits are become more alluring, but because he has fewer calls to attend to other objects; and because he has more encouragement to study his personal advantages, and pursue his separate interests.

If the disparities of rank and fortune which are necessary to the pursuit or enjoyment of luxury, introduce false grounds of precedency and estimation; if, on the mere considerations of being rich or poor, one order of men are, in their own apprehension, elevated, another debased; if one be criminally proud, another meanly dejected; and every rank in its place, like the tyrant, who thinks that nations are made for himself, be disposed to assume on the rights of mankind: although, upon the comparison, the higher order may be least corrupted; or
from

from education, and a sense of personal dignity, have most good qualities remaining; yet the one becoming mercenary and servile; the other imperious and arrogant; both regardless of justice, and of merit; the whole mass is corrupted, and the manners of a society changed for the worse, in proportion as its members cease to act on principles of equality, independence, or freedom.

UPON this view, and considering the merits of men in the abstract, a mere change from the habits of a republic to those of a monarchy; from the love of equality, to the sense of a subordination founded on birth, titles, and fortune, is ^{an} species of corruption to mankind. But this degree of corruption is still consistent with the safety and prosperity of some nations; it admits of a vigorous courage, by which the rights of individuals, and of kingdoms, may be long preserved.

UNDER the form of monarchy, while yet in its vigour, superior fortune is, indeed, one mark by which the different orders of men are distinguished; but there are some other ingredients, without which wealth is not admitted as a foundation of precedency, and in favour of which it is often despised, and lavished away. Such are birth and titles, the reputation of courage, courtly manners, and a certain elevation of mind. If we suppose, that these distinctions are forgotten, and nobility itself only to be known by the sumptuous retinue which money alone may procure; and by a lavish expence,



which the more recent fortunes can generally best sustain; luxury must then be allowed to corrupt the monarchical as much as the republican state, and to introduce a fatal dissolution of manners, under which men of every condition, although they are eager to acquire, or to display their wealth, have no remains of real ambition. They have neither the elevation of nobles, nor the fidelity of subjects; they have changed into effeminate vanity, that sense of honour which gave rules to the personal courage; and into a servile baseness, that loyalty, which bound each in his place, to his immediate superior, and the whole to the throne.

NATIONS are most exposed to corruption from this quarter, when the mechanical arts, being greatly advanced, furnish numberless articles, to be applied in ornament to the person, in furniture, entertainment, or equipage; when such articles as the rich alone can procure are admired; and when consideration, precedence, and rank, are accordingly made to depend on fortune.

IN a more rude state of the arts, although wealth be unequally divided, the opulent can amass only the simple means of subsistence: They can only fill the granary, and furnish the stall; reap from more extended fields, and drive their herds over a larger pasture. To enjoy their magnificence, they must live in a croud; and to secure their possessions, they must be surrounded with friends that espouse their quarrels. Their honours, as well as their safety, consist in the numbers who attend them;
and

and their personal distinctions are taken from their liberality, and supposed elevation of mind. In this manner, the possession of riches serves only to make the owner assume a character of magnanimity, to become the guardian of numbers, or the public object of respect and affection. But when the bulky constituents of wealth, and of rustic magnificence, can be exchanged for refinements; and when the produce of the soil may be turned into equipage, and mere decoration; when the combination of many is no longer required for personal safety; the master may become the sole consumer of his own estate: he may refer the use of every subject to himself; he may employ the materials of generosity to feed a personal vanity, or to indulge a sickly and effeminate fancy, which has learned to enumerate the trappings of weakness or folly among the necessaries of life.

THE Persian satrape, we are told, when he saw the King of Sparta at the place of their conference, stretched on the grass with his soldiers, blushed at the provision he had made for the accommodation of his own person: he ordered the furs and the carpets to be withdrawn; he felt his own inferiority; and recollected, that he was to treat with a man, not to vie with a pageant in costly attire and magnificence.

WHEN, amidst circumstances that make no trial of the virtues or talents of men, we have been accustomed to the air of superiority, which people of fortune derive from their retinue, we are apt to lose every sense of distinction



inction arising from merit, or even from abilities. We rate our fellow-citizens by the *figure* they are able to make; by their buildings, their dress, their equipage, and the train of their followers. All these circumstances make a part in our estimate of what is excellent; and if the master himself is known to be a pageant in the midst of his fortune, we nevertheless pay our court to his station, and look up with an envious, servile, or dejected mind, to what is, in itself, scarcely fit to amuse children; though, when it is worn as a badge of distinction, it inflames the ambition of those we call the great, and strikes the multitude with awe and respect.

WE judge of entire nations by the productions of a few mechanical arts, and think we are talking of men, while we are boasting of their estates, their dress, and their palaces. The sense in which we apply the terms, *great*, and *noble*, *high rank*, and *high life*, shew, that we have, on such occasions, transferred the idea of perfection from the character to the equipage; and that excellence itself is, in our esteem, a mere pageant, adorned at a great expence, by the labours of many workmen.

To those who overlook the subtle transitions of the imagination, it might appear, since wealth can do no more than furnish the means of subsistence, and purchase animal pleasures, that covetousness, and venality itself, should keep pace with our fears of want, or with our appetite for sensual enjoyments; and that where the appetite is satiated, and the fear of want is removed, the
mind

mind should be at ease on the subject of fortune. But they are not the mere pleasures that riches procure, nor the choice of viands which cover the board of the wealthy, that inflame the passions of the covetous and the mercenary. Nature is easily satisfied in all her enjoyments. It is an opinion of eminence, connected with fortune; it is a sense of debasement attending on poverty, which renders us blind to every advantage, but that of the rich; and insensible to every disgrace, but that of the poor. It is this unhappy apprehension, that occasionally prepares us for the desertion of every duty, for a submission to every indignity, and for the commission of every crime that can be accomplished in safety.

AURENGZEBE was not more renowned for sobriety in his private station, and in the conduct of a supposed dissimulation, by which he aspired to sovereign power, than he continued to be, even on the throne of Indostan. Simple, abstinent, and severe in his diet, and other pleasures, he still led the life of a hermit, and occupied his time with a seemingly painful application to the affairs of a great empire*. He quitted a station in which, if pleasure had been his object, he might have indulged his sensuality without reserve; he made his way to a scene of disquietude and care; he aimed at the summit of human greatness, in the possession of imperial fortune, not at the gratifications of animal appetite, or the enjoyment

* Gemelli Carceri.

of

of ease. Superior to sensual pleasure, as well as to the feelings of nature, he dethroned his father, and he murdered his brothers, that he might roll on a carriage incrusted with diamond and pearl; that his elephants, his camels, and his horses, on the march, might form a line extending many leagues; might present a glittering harness to the sun; and loaded with treasure, usher to the view of an abject and admiring croud, that awful majesty, in whose presence they were to strike the forehead on the ground, and be overwhelmed with the sense of his greatness, and with that of their own debasement.

As these are the objects which prompt the desire of dominion, and excite the ambitious to aim at the mastery of their fellow-creatures; so they inspire the ordinary race of men with a sense of infirmity and meanness, that prepares them to suffer indignities, and to become the property of persons, whom they consider as of a rank and a nature so much superior to their own.

THE chains of perpetual slavery, accordingly, appear to be rivetted in the East, no less by the pageantry which is made to accompany the possession of power, than they are by the fears of the sword, and the terrors of a military execution. In the West, as well as the East, we are willing to bow to the splendid equipage, and stand at an awful distance from the pomp of a princely estate. We too, may be terrified by the frowns, or won by the smiles, of those whose favour is riches and honour,
and

and whose displeasure is poverty and neglect. We too may overlook the honours of the human soul, from an admiration of the pageantries that accompany fortune. The procession of elephants harnessed with gold might dazzle into slaves, the people who derive corruption and weakness from the effect of their own arts and contrivances, as well as those who inherit servility from their ancestors, and are enfeebled by their natural temperament, and the enervating charms of their soil, and their climate.

IT appears, therefore, that although the mere use of materials which constitute luxury, may be distinguished from actual vice; yet nations under a high state of the commercial arts, are exposed to corruption, by their admitting wealth, unsupported by personal elevation and virtue, as the great foundation of distinction, and by having their attention turned on the side of interest, as the road to consideration and honour.

WITH this effect, luxury may serve to corrupt democratical states, by introducing a species of monarchical subordination, without that sense of high birth and hereditary honours which render the boundaries of rank fixed and determinate, and which teach men to act in their stations with force and propriety. It may prove the occasion of political corruption, even in monarchical governments, by drawing respect towards mere wealth; by casting a shade on the lustre of personal qualities, or
family-

PROVIDENCE

