

Book 8, Chapter 05

Objection to this System from the Question of Permanence

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People :

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Text :

BOOK VIII OF

PROPERTY

CHAPTER V

OBJECTION TO THIS SYSTEM FROM THE QUESTION OF PERMANENCE

Grounds of the objection. - Its serious import. - Nature of the equality under consideration - as produced by a stricter sense of justice - and a purer theory of happiness.

THE change we are here contemplating consists in the disposition of every member of the community voluntarily to resign that which would be productive of a much higher degree of benefit and pleasure when possessed by his neighbor than when occupied by himself. Undoubtedly, this state of society is remote from the modes of thinking and acting which at present prevail. A long period of time must probably elapse before it can be brought entirely into practice. All we have been attempting to establish is that such a state of society is

agreeable to reason, and prescribed by justice; and that, of consequence, the progress of science and political truth among mankind is closely connected with its introduction. The inherent tendency of intellect is to improvement. If therefore this inherent tendency be suffered to operate, and no concussion of nature or inundation of barbarism arrest its course, the state of society we have been describing must, at some time, arrive.

But it has frequently been said 'that if an equality of conditions could be introduced today, it would be destroyed tomorrow. It is impossible to reduce the varieties of the human mind to such a uniformity as this system demands. One man will be more industrious than another; one man will be provident and avaricious, and another dissipated and thoughtless. Misery and confusion would be the result of an attempt to equalize, in the first instance, and the old vices and monopolies would succeed, in the second. All that the rich could purchase by the most generous sacrifice would be a period of barbarism, from which the ideas and regulations of civil society must recommence, as from a new infancy.'

Upon this statement, it is first to be remarked that, if true, it presents to us a picture in the highest degree melancholy and discouraging. It discovers a disease to which it is probable there is no remedy. Human knowledge must proceed. What we see and admire we shall at some time or other seek to attain: Such is the inevitable law of our nature. It is impossible not to see the beauty of equality, and not to be charmed with the benefits it appears to promise. It is impossible not to regret the unbounded mischiefs and distress that grow out of the opposite system. The consequence is sure. Man, according to these reasoners, is prompted, for some time, to advance with success but after that, in the very act of pursuing further improvement, he necessarily plunges beyond the compass of his powers, and has his petty career to begin afresh: always pursuing what is beautiful, always frustrated in his object, always involved in calamities by the very means he employs to escape them.

Secondly, it is to be observed that there is a wide difference between the equality here spoken of, and the equality which has frequently constituted a subject of discussion among mankind. This is not an equality introduced by force, or maintained by the laws and regulations of a positive institution. It is not the result of accident, of the authority of a chief magistrate, or the over-earnest persuasion of

a few enlightened thinkers; but is produced by the serious and deliberate conviction of the public at large. It is one thing for men to be held to a certain system by the force of laws, and the vigilance of those who administer them; and a thing entirely different to be held by the firm and habitual persuasion of their own minds. We can readily conceive their finding means to elude the former; but it is not so easy to comprehend a disobedience to the latter. If the force of truth shall be strong enough gradually to wean men from the most rooted habits, and to introduce a mode of society so remote from that which at present exists, it will also probably be strong enough to hold them in the course they have commenced, and to prevent the return of vices which have once been extirpated. This probability will be increased if we recollect the two principles which must have led men into such a system of action; a stricter sense of justice, and a purer theory of happiness.

Equality of conditions cannot begin to assume a fixed appearance in human society till the sentiment becomes deeply impressed, as well as widely diffused, that the genuine wants of any man constitute his only just claim to the ultimate appropriation, and the consumption, of any species of commodity. It must previously be seen that the claims of one man are originally of the same extent as the claims of another; and that the only difference which can arise must relate to extraordinary infirmity, or the particular object of utility which any individual is engaged in promoting. It must be felt that the most fundamental and noxious of all kinds of injustice is for one man actively to withhold from his neighbors the most indispensable benefits, for the sake of some trivial accommodation to himself. Men who are habituated to these views can scarcely be tempted to monopolize; and the sense of the community respecting him who yields to the temptation will be so decisive in its tenor, and unequivocal in its manifestation, as to afford small encouragement to perseverance or imitation.

A spontaneous equality of conditions also implies purer theory of happiness than has hitherto obtained. Men will cease to regard with complacency the happiness that consists in splendour and ostentation, of which the true object, however disguised, is to insult our neighbors, and to feed our own vanity, with the recollection of the goods that we possess, and from which, though endowed with an equal claim, they are debarred. They will cease to derive pleasure from the empire to be possessed over others, or the base servility and terror with which they may

address us. They will be contented for the most part, with the means of healthful existence, and of unexpensive pleasure. They will find the highest gratification in promoting and contemplating the general happiness. They will regard superfluities, absolutely considered, with no impatience of desire; and will abhor the idea of obtaining them through the medium of oppression and injustice. This conduct they would be induced to observe, even were their own gratification only in view and, instead of repining at the want of exorbitant indulgencies, they will stand astonished that men could ever have found gratification in that which was visibly stamped and contaminated with the badge of extortion.

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