

AN ENQUIRY CONCERNING POLITICAL JUSTICE

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BOOK VIII / OP PROPERTY

CHAPTER I / GENUINE SYSTEM OF PROPERTY DELINEATED

Importance of this topic. -- Abuses to which it has been exposed. -- Criterion of property justice. -
- Entitles each man to the supply of his animal wants as far as the general stock will afford it -- To
the means of well being. -- Estimate of luxury. -- Its pernicious effects on the individual who
partakes of it. -- Idea of labour as the foundation of property considered. -- Its unreasonableness.
{788} -- System of popular morality on this subject. -- Defects of that system.

The subject of property is the keystone that completes the fabric of political justice. According as our ideas respecting it are crude or correct, they will enlighten us as to the consequences of a *simple form of society without government*, and remove the prejudices that attach us to complexity. There is nothing that more powerfully tends to distort our *judgment* and *opinions*, than erroneous notions concerning the goods of fortune. Finally, the period that shall put an end to the system of *coercion* and *punishment*, is intimately connected with the circumstance of the property's being placed upon an equitable basis.

Various abuses of the most incontrovertible nature have insinuated themselves into the administration of property. Each of these abuses might usefully be made the subject of a separate investigation. We might enquire into the vexations of this sort that are produced by the dreams of national greatness or magistratical vanity. This would lead us to a just estimate of the different kinds of taxation, landed or mercantile, having the necessaries or the luxuries of life for their subject of operation. We might examine into the abuses which have adhered to the commercial system; monopolies, charters, patents, protecting duties, prohibitions and bounties. We might remark upon the consequences that flow from the feudal system and the system of {789} ranks; seignorial duties, fines, conveyances, entails, estates freehold, copyhold and manorial, vassalage and primogeniture. We might consider the rights of the church; first fruits and tithes: and we might enquire into the propriety of the regulation by which a man, after having possessed as sovereign a considerable property during his life, is permitted to dispose of it at his pleasure, at the period which the laws of nature seem to have fixed as the termination of his authority. All these enquiries would tend to show the incalculable importance of this subject. But, excluding them all from the present enquiry, it shall be the business of what remains of this work to consider, not any particular abuses which have incidentally risen out of the administration of property, but those general principles by which it has in almost all cases been directed, and which, if erroneous, must not only be regarded as the source of the abuses above enumerated, but of others of innumerable kinds, too multifarious and subtle to enter into so brief a catalogue.

What is the criterion that must determine whether this or that substance, capable of contributing to the benefit of a human being, ought to be considered

as your property or mine? To this question there can be but one answer -- Justice. Let us then recur to the principles of justice¹.

To whom does any article of property, suppose a loaf of bread, {790} justly belong? To him who most wants it, or to whom the possession of it will be most beneficial. Here are six men famished with hunger, and the loaf is, absolutely considered, capable of satisfying the cravings of them all. Who is it that has a reasonable claim to benefit by the qualities with which this loaf is endowed? They are all brothers perhaps, and the law of primogeniture bestows it exclusively to the eldest. But does justice confirm this award? The laws of different countries dispose of property in a thousand different ways; but there can be but one way which is most conformable to reason.

It would have been easy to put a case much stronger than that which has just been stated. I have an hundred loaves in my possession and in the next street there is a poor man expiring with hunger, to whom one of these loaves would be the means of preserving his life. If I withhold this loaf from him, am I not unjust? If I impart it, am I not complying with what justice demands? To whom does the loaf justly belong?

I suppose myself in other respects to be in easy circumstances, and that I do not want this bread as an object of barter or sale, to procure me any of the other necessities of a human being. Our animal wants have long since been defined, and are stated to consist of food, clothing and shelter. If justice have any meaning, nothing can be more iniquitous, than for one man to possess superfluities, {791} while there is a human being in existence that is not adequately supplied with these.

Justice does not stop here. Every man is entitled, so far as the general stock will suffice, not only to the means of being, but of well being. It is unjust, if one man labour to the destruction of his health or his life, that another man may abound in luxuries. It is unjust, if one man be deprived of leisure to cultivate his rational powers, while another man contributes not a single effort to add to the common stock. The faculties of one man are like the faculties of another man. Justice directs that each man, unless perhaps he be employed more beneficially to the public, should contribute to the cultivation of the common harvest, of which man consumes a share. This reciprocity indeed, as was observed when that subject was the matter of separate consideration, is of the very essence of justice. How the latter branch of it, the necessary labour, is to be secured, while each man is admitted to claim his share of the produce, we shall presently have occasion to enquire.

This subject will be placed in a still more striking light, if we reflect for a moment on the nature of luxuries. The wealth of any state may intelligibly enough be considered as the aggregate of all the incomes, which are annually consumed within that state, without destroying the materials of an equal consumption {792} in the ensuing year. Considering this income as being, what in almost all cases it will be found to be, the produce of the industry of the inhabitants, it will follow that in civilised countries the peasant does not consume more than the

twentieth part of the produce of his labour, while his rich neighbour consumes perhaps the produce of the labour of twenty peasants. The benefit that arises to this favoured mortal ought surely to be very extraordinary.

But nothing is more evident than that the condition of this man is the reverse of beneficial. The man of an hundred pounds *per annum*, if he understand his own happiness, is a thousand times more favourably circumstanced. What shall the rich man do with his enormous wealth? Shall he eat of innumerable dishes of the most expensive viands, or pour down hogsheads of the most highly flavoured wines? A frugal diet will contribute infinitely more to health, to a clear understanding, to chearful spirits, and even to the gratification of the appetites. Almost every other expence is an expence of ostentation. No man, but the most sordid epicure, would long continue to maintain even a plentiful table, if he had no spectators, visitors or servants, to behold his establishment. For whom are our sumptuous palaces and costly furniture, our equipages, and even our very clothes? The nobleman, who should for the first time let his imagination loose to conceive the style in which he would live, if he had nobody to {793} observe, and no eye to please but his own, would no doubt be surprised to find that vanity had been the first mover in all his actions.

The object of this vanity is to procure the admiration and applause of beholders. We need not here enter into the intrinsic value of applause. Taking it for granted that it is as estimable an acquisition as any man can suppose it, how contemptible is the source of applause to which the rich man has recourse? 'Applaud me, because my ancestor has left me a great estate.' What merit is there in that? The first effect then of riches is to deprive their possessor of the genuine powers of understanding, and render him incapable of discerning absolute truth. They lead him to fix his affections on objects not accommodated to the wants and the structure of the human mind, and of consequence entail upon him disappointment and unhappiness. The greatest of all personal advantages are, independence of mind, which makes us feel that our satisfactions are not at the mercy either of men or of fortune; and activity of mind, the chearfulness that arises from industry perpetually employed about objects, of which our judgment acknowledges the intrinsic value.

In this case we have compared the happiness of the man of extreme opulence with that of the man of one hundred pounds *per annum*. But the latter side of this alternative was assumed merely in compliance with existing prejudices. Even in the {794} present state of human society we perceive, that a man, who should be perpetually earning the necessary competence by a very moderate industry, and with his pursuits uncrossed by the peevishness or caprice of his neighbours, would not be less happy than if he were born to that competence. In the state of society we are here contemplating, where, as will presently appear, the requisite industry will be of the lightest kind, it will be the reverse of a misfortune to any man, to find himself necessarily stimulated to a gentle activity, and in consequence to feel that no reverse of fortune could deprive him of the means of subsistence and contentment.

But it has been alledged, 'that we find among different men very different degrees of labour and industry, and that it is not just they should receive an equal reward.' It cannot indeed be denied that the attainments of men in virtue and usefulness ought by no means to be confounded. How far the present system of property contributes to their being equitably treated it is very easy to determine. The present system of property confers on one man immense wealth in consideration of an accident of his birth. He that from beggary ascends to opulence, is usually known not to have effected this transition by methods very creditable to his honesty or his usefulness. The most industrious and active member of society is frequently with great difficulty able to keep his family from starving. {795}

But, to pass over these iniquitous effects of the unequal distribution of property, let us consider the nature of the reward which is thus proposed to industry. If you be industrious, you shall have an hundred times more food than you can eat, and an hundred times more clothes than you can wear. Where is the justice of this? If I be the greatest benefactor the human species ever knew, is that a reason for bestowing on me what I do not want, especially when there are thousands to whom my superfluity would be of the greatest advantage? With this superfluity I can purchase nothing but gaudy ostentation and envy, nothing but the pitiful pleasure of returning to the poor under the name of generosity that to which reason gives them an irresistible claim, nothing but prejudice, error and vice.

The doctrine of the injustice of accumulated property has been the foundation of all religious morality. The object of this morality has been, to excite men by individual virtue to repair this injustice. The most energetic teachers of religion have been irresistibly led to assert the precise truth upon this interesting subject. They have taught the rich, that they hold their wealth only as a trust, that they are strictly accountable for every atom of their expenditure, that they are merely administrators, and by no means proprietors in chief². The defect of this system is, that they rather excite us to palliate our injustice than to forsake it. {796}

No truth can be more simple than that which they inculcate. There is no action of any human being, and certainly no action that respects the disposition of property, that is not capable of better and worse, and concerning which reason and morality do not prescribe a specific conduct. He that sets out with acknowledging that other men are of the same nature as himself, and is capable of perceiving the precise place he would hold in the eye of an impartial spectator, must be fully sensible, that the money he employs in procuring an object of trifling or no advantage to himself, and which might have been employed in purchasing substantial and indispensable benefit to another, is unjustly employed. He that looks at his property with the eye of truth, will find that every shilling of it has received its destination from the dictates of justice. He will at the same time however be exposed to considerable pain, in consequence of his own ignorance as the precise disposition that justice and public utility require.

Does any man doubt of the truth of these assertions? Does any man doubt that, when I employ a sum of money small or great in the purchase of an absolute luxury for myself, I am guilty of vice? It is high time that we should lay aside the very names of justice and virtue, or that we should acknowledge that they do not authorise us to accumulate luxuries upon ourselves, while we see others in want of the indispensable means of improvement and happiness. {797}

But, while religion inculcated on mankind the impartial nature of justice, its teachers have been too apt to treat the practice of justice, not as a debt, which it ought to be considered, but as an affair of spontaneous generosity and bounty. They have called upon the rich to be clement and merciful to the poor. The consequence of this has been that the rich, when they bestowed the most slender pittance of their enormous wealth in acts of charity, as they were called, took merit to themselves for what they gave, instead of considering themselves as delinquents for what they withheld.

Religion is in reality in all its parts an accommodation to the prejudices and weaknesses of mankind. Its authors communicated to the world as much truth, as they calculated that the world would be willing to receive. But it is time that we should lay aside the instruction intended only for children in understanding³, and contemplate the nature and principles of things. If religion has spoken out, and told us that it was just that all men should receive the supply of their wants, we should presently have been led to suspect that a gratuitous distribution to be made by the rich, was a very indirect and ineffectual way of arriving at this object. The experience of all ages has taught us, that this system is productive only of a very precarious supply. The principle object which it seems to propose, is to place this supply in the disposal of a few, enabling them to make a show of {798} generosity with what is not truly their own, and to purchase the gratitude of the poor by payment of a debt. It is a system of clemency and charity, instead of a system of justice. It fills the rich with unreasonable pride by the spurious denominations with which it decorates their acts, and the poor with servility, by leading them to regard the slender comforts they obtain, not as their incontrovertible due, but as the good pleasure and the grace of their opulent neighbours.