



Of Property

William Godwin

[1793 / Chapter 1]

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

The subject of property is the key-stone 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 judgement and opinions than erroneous notions concerning the goods of fortune. Finally, the period that must put an end to the system of coercion and punishment is intimately connected with the circumstance of 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, and the sumptuousness of public offices and magistrates. 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 consider the claims of the church: first fruits and tithes. All these disquisitions 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 examine the subject in its most general principles, and by that means endeavour to discover the source, not only of the abuses above enumerated, but of others of innumerable kinds, too multifarious and subtle to enter into so brief a catalogue.

The subject to which the doctrine of property relates is all those things which conduce, or may be conceived to conduce, to the benefit or pleasure of man, and which can no otherwise be applied to the use of one or more persons than by a permanent or temporary exclusion of the rest of the species. Such things in particular are food, clothing, habitation and furniture.

Upon this subject two questions unavoidably arise. Who is the person entitled to the use of any particular article of this kind? Who is the person in whose hands the preservation and distribution of any number of these articles will be most justly and beneficially vested?

The answer to the first of these questions is easy upon the principles of the present work. Justice has been proved to be a rule applicable to all the concerns of man. It pronounces upon every case that can arise, and leaves nothing to the disposal of a momentary caprice.(1*) There is not an article of the kinds above specified which will not ultimately be the instrument of more benefit and happiness in one individual mode of application than in any other than can be devised. This is the application it ought to receive.

We are here led to the consideration of that species of rights which was designedly postponed in an earlier division of this work.(2*) Every man has a right to that, the exclusive possession of which being awarded to him, a greater sum of benefit or pleasure will result than could have arisen from its

being otherwise appropriated. This is the same principle as that just delivered, with a slight variation of form. If man have a right to anything, he has a right to justice. These terms, as they have ordinarily been used in moral enquiry, are, strictly and properly speaking, convertible terms.

Let us see how this principle will operate in the inferences it authorises us to make. Human beings are partakers of a common nature; what conduces to the benefit or pleasure of one man will conduce to the benefit or pleasure of another.(3*) Hence it follows, upon the principles of equal and impartial justice, that the good things of the world are a common stock, upon which one man has as valid a title as another to draw for what he wants. It appears in this respect, as formerly it appeared in the case of our claim to the forbearance of each other,(4*) that each man has a sphere the limit and termination of which is marked out by the equal sphere of his neighbour. I have a right to the means of subsistence; he has an equal right. I have a right to every pleasure I can participate without injury to myself or others; his title in this respect is of similar extent.

This view of the subject will appear the more striking if we pass in review the good things of the world. They may be divided into four classes; subsistence; the means of intellectual and moral improvement; inexpensive gratifications; and such gratifications as are by no means essential to healthful and vigorous existence, and cannot be purchased but with considerable labour and industry. It is the last class principally that interposes an obstacle in the way of equal distribution. It will be matter of after-consideration how far and how many articles of this class would be admissible into the purest mode of social existence.(5*) But, in the meantime, it is unavoidable to remark the inferiority of this class to the three preceding. Without it we may enjoy to a great extent activity, contentment and cheerfulness. And in what manner are these seeming superfluities usually procured? By abridging multitudes of men to a deplorable degree in points of essential moment, that one man may be accommodated, with sumptuous yet, strictly considered, insignificant luxuries. Supposing the alternative could fairly be brought home to a man, and it could depend upon his instant decision, by the sacrifice of these to give to five hundred of his fellow beings leisure, independence, conscious dignity, and whatever can refine and enlarge the human understanding, it is difficult to conceive him to hesitate. But, though this alternative cannot be produced in the case of an individual, it will perhaps be found to be the true alternative, when taken at once in reference to the species.

To the forming a just estimate of costly gratifications, it is necessary that we should abstract the direct pleasure, on the one hand, from the pleasure they afford us only as instruments for satisfying our love of distinction. It must be admitted in every system of morality not tainted with monastic prejudices, but adapted to the nature of intelligent beings, that, so far as relates to ourselves, and leaving our connection with the species out of the consideration, we ought not to refuse any pleasure, except as it tends to the exclusion of some greater pleasure.(6*) But it has already been shown(7*) that the difference in the pleasures of the palate, between a simple and wholesome diet on the one hand, and all the complexities of the most splendid table on the other, is so small that few men would even think it worth the tedium that attends upon a change of services, if the pleasure of the palate were the only thing in question, and they had no spectator to admire their magnificence. 'He who should form himself, with the greatest care, upon a system of solitary sensualism, would probably come at last to a decision not different from that which Epicurus is said to have adopted in favour of fresh herbs, and water from the spring.'(8*) The same observation applies to the splendour of furniture, equipage and dress. So far as relates to the gratification of the eye, this pleasure may be reaped, with less trouble, and in greater refinement, from the beauties which nature exhibits to our observation. No man, if the direct pleasure were the only thing in consideration, would think the difference to himself worth purchasing by the oppression of multitudes.

But these things, though trivial in themselves, are highly prized, from that love of distinction which is characteristic of every human mind. The creditable artisan or tradesman exerts a certain species of industry to supply his immediate wants. But these are soon supplied. The rest is exerted that he may wear a better coat, that he may clothe his wife with gay attire, that he may have not merely a shelter, but a handsome habitation, not merely bread and flesh to eat, but that he may set it out with suitable decorum. How many of these things would engage his attention if he lived in a desert island, and had no spectator of his economy? If we survey the appendages of our persons, there is scarcely an article that is not in some respect an appeal to the good will of our neighbours, or a refuge against their contempt. It is for this that the merchant braves the perils of the ocean, and the mechanical inventor bring forth the treasures of his meditation. The soldier advances even to the cannon's mouth, and the statesman exposes himself to the rage of an indignant people, because he cannot bear to pass through life without distinction and esteem. Exclusively of certain higher motives which will hereafter be mentioned,(9*) this is the purpose of all the great exertions of mankind. The man who has nothing to

provide for but his animal wants scarcely ever shakes off the lethargy of his mind; but the love of honour hurries us on to the most incredible achievements.

It must be admitted indeed that the love of distinction appears, from experience and the past history of mankind, to have been their ruling passion. But the love of distinction is capable of different directions. At present, there is no more certain road to the general deference of mankind than the exhibition of wealth. The poet, the wit, the orator, the saviour of his country, and the ornament of his species may upon certain occasions be treated with neglect and biting contempt; but the man who possesses and disburses money in profusion can scarcely fail to procure the attendance of the obsequious man and the flatterer. But let us conceive this erroneous and pernicious estimate of things to be reversed. Let us suppose the avaricious man, who is desirous of monopolizing the means of happiness, and the luxurious man, who expends without limitation, in pampering his appetites, that which, in strict justice, is the right of another, to be contemplated with as much disapprobation as they are now beheld by a mistaken world with deference and respect. Let us imagine the direct and unambiguous road to public esteem to be the acquisition of talent, or the practice of virtue, the cultivation of some species of ingenuity, or the display of some generous and expansive sentiment; and that the persons who possess these talents were as conspicuously treated with affection and esteem as the wealthy are now treated with slavish attention. This is merely, in other words, to suppose good sense, and clear and correct perceptions, at some time to gain the ascendancy in the world. But it is plain that, under the reign of such sentiments, the allurements that now wait upon costly gratification, would be, for the most part, annihilated. If, through the spurious and incidental recommendations it derives from the love of distinction, it is now rendered, to many, a principal source of agreeable sensation, under a different state of opinion, it would not merely be reduced to its intrinsic value in point of sensation, but, in addition to this, would be connected with ideas of injustice, unpopularity and dislike. So small is the space which costly gratifications are calculated unalterably to fill in the catalogue of human happiness.

It has sometimes been alleged, as an argument against the equal rights of men in the point of which we are treating, 'that the merits of men are different, and ought to be differently rewarded'. But it may be questioned whether this proposition, though true, can with any show of plausibility be applied to the present subject. Reasons have been already suggested to prove that positive institutions do not afford the best means for rewarding virtue, and that human excellence will be more effectually forwarded by those encouragements which inevitably arise from the system of the universe.(10*) But, exclusively of this consideration, let us recollect, upon the grounds of what has just been stated, what sort of reward is thus proposed to exertion. 'If you show yourself deserving, you shall have the essence of a hundred times more food than you can eat, and a hundred times more clothes than you can wear. You shall have a patent for taking away from others the means of a happy and respectable existence, and for consuming them in riotous and unmeaning extravagance.' is this the reward that ought to be offered to virtue, or that virtue should stoop to take?

The doctrine of the injustice of accumulated property has been the foundation of all religious morality. Its most energetic teachers have been irresistibly led to assert the precise truth in this respect. 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 chief.(11*) But, while religion thus inculcated on mankind the pure principles of justice, the majority of its possessors have been but 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.

The effect which is produced by this accommodating doctrine is to place the supply of our wants in the disposal of a few, enabling them to make a show of generosity with what is not truly their own, and to purchase the submission of the poor by the payment of a debt. There 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 grace of their opulent neighbours.

NOTES:

1. Book II, Chap. II.
2. Book II, Chap. V.
3. Book III, Chap. III.
4. Book II, Chap. V.

5. Chap. VII.
6. Book IV, Chap. XI.
7. Book I, Chap. V.
8. Book I, Chap. V.
9. Chap. VI.
10. Book V, Chap. XII; Book XI, Chap I.
11. Mark, Ch. X, ver. 21; Acts, Ch. II, ver. 44, 45. See also Swift's Sermon on Mutual Subjection.

[Page 1](#) * [Page 2](#) * [Page 3](#) * [Page 4](#) * [Page 5](#) * [Page 6](#) * [Page 7](#)





Of Property

William Godwin

[1793 / Charter 2 / Part 2 of 7]

PRINCIPLES OF PROPERTY

Having considered at large the question of the person entitled to the use of the means of benefit or pleasure, it is time that we proceed to the second question, of the person in whose hands the preservation and distribution of any of these means will be most justly and beneficially vested. An interval must inevitably occur between the production of any commodity and its consumption. Those things which are necessary for the accommodation of man in society cannot be obtained without the labour of man. When fit for his use, they do not admit of being left at random, but require that some care and vigilance should be exerted to preserve them, for the period of actual consumption. They will not, in the first instance, fall into the possession of each individual, in the precise proportion necessary for his consumption. Who then is to be the factor or warehouseman that is to watch over their preservation, and preside at their distribution?

This is strictly speaking the question of property. We do not call the person who accidentally takes his dinner at my table the proprietor of what he eats, though it is he, in the direct and obvious sense, who receives the benefit of it. Property implies some permanence of external possession, and includes in it the idea of a possible competitor.

Of property there are three degrees.

The first and simplest degree is that of my permanent right in those things the use of which being attributed to me, a greater sum of benefit or pleasure will result than could have arisen from their being otherwise appropriated. It is of no consequence, in this case, how I came into possession of them, the only necessary conditions being their superior usefulness to me, and that my title to them is such as is generally acquiesced in by the community in which I live. Every man is unjust who conducts himself in such a manner respecting these things as to infringe, in any degree, upon my power of using them, at the time when the using them will be of real importance to me.

It has already appeared(1*) that one of the most essential of the rights of man is my right to the forbearance of others; not merely that they shall refrain from every thing that may, by direct consequence, affect my life, or the possession of my powers, but that they shall refrain from usurping upon my understanding, and shall leave me a certain equal sphere for the exercise of my private judgement. This is necessary because it is possible for them to be wrong, as well as for me to be so, because the exercise of the understanding is essential to the improvement of man, and because the pain and interruption I suffer are as real, when they infringe, in my conception only, upon what is of importance to me, as if the infringement had been, in the utmost degree, palpable. Hence it follows that no man may, in ordinary cases, make use of my apartment, furniture or garments, or of my food, in the way of barter or loan, without having first obtained my consent.

The second degree of property is the empire to which every man is entitled over the produce of his own industry, even that part of it the use of which ought not to be appropriated to himself. It has been repeatedly shown that all the rights of man which are of this description are passive.(2*) He has no right of option in the disposal of anything which may fall into his hands. Every shilling of his property, and even every, the minutest, exertion of his powers have received their destination from the decrees of justice. He is only the steward. But still he is the steward. These things must be trusted to his award, checked only by the censorial power that is vested, in the general sense, and favourable or unfavourable opinion, of that portion of mankind among whom he resides. Man is changed from the capable subject of illimitable excellence, into the vilest and most

despicable thing that imagination can conceive, when he is restrained from acting upon the dictates of his understanding. All men cannot individually be entitled to exercise compulsion on each other, for this would produce universal anarchy. All men cannot collectively be entitled to exercise unbounded compulsion, for this would produce universal slavery: the interference of government, however impartially vested, is, no doubt, only to be resorted to upon occasions of rare occurrence, and indispensable urgency.

It will readily be perceived that this second species of property is in a less rigorous sense fundamental than the first. It is, in one point of view, a sort of usurpation. It vests in me the preservation and dispensing of that which in point of complete and absolute right belongs to you.

The third degree of property is that which occupies the most vigilant attention in the civilized states of Europe. It is a system, in whatever manner established, by which one man enters into the faculty of disposing of the produce of another man's industry. There is scarcely any species of wealth, expenditure or splendour, existing in any civilized country, that is not, in some way, produced by the express manual labour, and corporeal industry, of the inhabitants of that country. The spontaneous productions of the earth are few, and contribute little to wealth, expenditure or splendour. Every man may calculate, in every glass of wine he drinks, and every ornament he annexes to his person, how many individuals have been condemned to slavery and sweat, incessant drudgery, unwholesome food, continual hardships, deplorable ignorance, and brutal insensibility, that he may be supplied with these luxuries. It is a gross imposition that men are accustomed to put upon themselves when they talk of the property bequeathed to them by their ancestors. The property is produced by the daily labour of men who are now in existence. All that their ancestors bequeathed to them was a mouldy patent which they show as a title to extort from their neighbours what the labour of those neighbours has produced.

It is clear therefore that the third species of property is in direct contradiction to the second.

The most desirable state of human society would require that the quantity of manual labour and corporal industry to be exerted, and particularly that part of it which is not the uninfluenced choice of our own judgement, but is imposed upon each individual by the necessity of his affairs, should be reduced within as narrow limits as possible. For any man to enjoy the most trivial accommodation, while, at the same time a similar accommodation is not accessible to every other member of the community, is, absolutely speaking, wrong. All refinements of luxury, all inventions that tend to give employment to a great number of labouring hands, are directly adverse to the propagation of happiness. Every additional tax that is laid on, every new channel that is opened for the expenditure of the public money, unless it be compensated (which is scarcely ever the case) by an equivalent deduction from the luxuries of the rich, is so much added to the general stock of ignorance, drudgery and hardship. The country-gentleman who, by levelling an eminence, or introducing a sheet of water into his park, finds work for hundreds of industrious poor is the enemy, and not, as has commonly been imagined, the friend, of his species. Let us suppose that, in any country, there is now ten times as much industry and manual labour as there was three centuries ago. Except so far as this is applied to maintain an increased population, it is expended in the more costly indulgences of the rich. Very little indeed is employed to increase the happiness or conveniences of the poor. They barely subsist at present, and they did as much at the remoter period of which we speak. Those who, by fraud or force, have usurped the power of buying and selling the labour of the great mass of the community are sufficiently disposed to take care that they should never do more than subsist. An object of industry added to or taken from the general stock produces a momentary difference, but things speedily fall back into their former state. If every labouring inhabitant of Great Britain were able and willing today to double the quantity of his industry, for a short time he would derive some advantage from the increased stock of commodities produced. But the rich would speedily discover the means of monopolizing this produce, as they had done the former. A small part of it only could consist in commodities essential to the subsistence of man, or be fairly distributed through the community. All that is luxury and superfluity would increase the accommodations of the rich, and perhaps, by reducing the price of luxuries, augment the number of those to whom such accommodations were accessible. But it would afford no alleviation to the great mass of the community. Its more favoured members would give their inferiors no greater wages for twenty hours' labour, suppose, than they now do for ten.

What reason is there then that this species of property should be respected? Because, ill as the system is, it will perhaps be found that it is better than any other, which, by any means, except those of reason, the love of distinction, or the love of justice, can be substituted in its place. It is not easy to say whether misery or absurdity would be most conspicuous in a plan which should invite every man to seize upon everything he conceived himself to want. If, by positive institution, the property of every man were equalized today, without a contemporary change in men's dispositions and sentiments, it would become unequal tomorrow. The same evils would spring up with a rapid growth; and we should have gained nothing, by a project which, while it violated every man's habits, and many men's inclinations, would render thousands miserable. We have already

shown,(3*) and shall have occasion to show more at large,(4*) how pernicious the consequences would be if government were to take the whole permanently into their hands, and dispense to every man his daily bread. It may even be suspected that agrarian laws, and others of a similar tendency which have been invented for the purpose of keeping down the spirit of accumulation, deserve to be regarded as remedies more pernicious than the disease they are intended to cure.(5*)

An interesting question suggests itself in this stage of the discussion. How far is the idea of property to be considered as the offspring of positive institution? The decision of this question may prove extremely essential to the point upon which we are engaged. The regulation of property by positive laws may be a very exceptionable means of reforming its present inequality, at the same time that an equal objection may by no means lie against a proceeding the object of which shall be merely to supersede positive laws, or such positive laws as are peculiarly exceptionable.

In pursuing this enquiry, it is necessary to institute a distinction between such positive laws, or established practices (which are often found little less efficacious than laws), as are peculiar to certain ages and countries, and such laws or practices as are common to all civilized communities, and may therefore be perhaps interwoven with the existence of society.

The idea of property, or permanent empire, in those things which ought to be applied to our personal use, and still more in the produce of our industry, unavoidably suggests the idea of some species of law or practice by which it is guaranteed. Without this, property could not exist. Yet we have endeavoured to show that the maintenance of these two kinds of property is highly beneficial. Let us consider the consequences that grow out of this position.

Every man should be urged to the performance of his duty, as much as possible, by the instigations of reason alone.(6*) Compulsion to be exercised by one human being over another, whether individually, or in the name of the community, if in any case to be resorted to, is at least to be resorted to only in cases of indispensable urgency. It is not therefore to be called in for the purpose of causing one individual to exert a little more, or another a little less, of productive industry. Neither is it to be called in for the purpose of causing the industrious individual to make the precise distribution of his produce which he ought to make. Hence it follows that, while the present erroneous opinions and prejudices respecting accumulation continue, actual accumulation will, in some degree, take place.

For, let it be observed that, not only no well informed community will interfere with the quantity of any man's industry, or the disposal of its produce, but the members of every such well informed community will exert themselves to turn aside the purpose of any man who shall be inclined, to dictate to, or restrain, his neighbour in this respect.

The most destructive of all excesses is that where one man shall dictate to another, or undertake to compel him to do, or refrain from doing, anything (except, as was before stated, in cases of the most indispensable urgency) otherwise than with his own consent. Hence it follows that the distribution of wealth in every community must be left to depend upon the sentiments of the individuals of that community. If, in any society, wealth be estimated at its true value, and accumulate and monopoly be regarded as the seals of mischief, injustice and dishonour, instead of being treated as titles attention and deference, in that society the accommodations of human life will tend to their level, and the equality of conditions will be destroyed.(7*) A revolution opinions is the only means of attaining to this inestimable benefit. Every attempt to effect this purpose by means of regulation will probably be found ill conceived and abortive. Be this as it will, every attempt to correct the distribution of wealth by individual violence is certainly to be regarded as hostile to the first principles of public security.

If one individual, by means of greater ingenuity or more indefatigable industry, obtain a great proportion of the necessaries or conveniences of life than his neighbour, and, having obtained them, determine to convert them into the means of permanent inequality, this proceeding is not of a sort that it would be just or wise to undertake to repress by means of coercion. If, inequality being thus introduced, the poorer member of the community shall be so depraved as to be willing, or so unfortunately circumstanced as to be driven, to make himself the hired servant or labourer of his richer neighbour, this probably is not an evil to be corrected by the interposition of government. But, when we have gained this step, it will be difficult to set bounds to the extent of accumulation in one man, or of poverty and wretchedness in another.

It has already appeared that reason requires that no man shall endeavour, by individual violence, to correct this inequality. Reason would probably, in a well ordered community, be sufficient to restrain men from the attempt so to correct it. Where society existed in the simplicity which has formerly been described,(8*)

accumulation itself would be restrained by the very means that restrained depredation, the good sense of the community, and the inspection of all exercised upon all. Violence therefore would, on the one hand, have little to tempt it as, on the other, it would be incessantly and irresistibly repressed.

But, if reason prove insufficient for this fundamental purpose, other means must doubtless be employed.(9*) It is better that one man should suffer than that the community should be destroyed. General security is one of those indispensable preliminaries without which nothing, good or excellent can be accomplished. It is therefore right that property, with all its inequalities, such as it is sanctioned by the general sense of the members of any state, and so long as that sanction continues unvaried should be defended, if need be, by means of coercion.

We have already endeavoured to show that coercion would probably, in no case, be necessary but for the injudicious magnitude and complication of political societies.(10*) In a general and absolute sense therefore it cannot be vindicated. But there are duties incumbent upon us of a temporary and local nature; and we may occasionally be required, by the pressure of circumstances, to suspend and contravene principles, the most sound in their general nature.(11*) Till men shall be persuaded to part with the ideas of a complicated government and an extensive territory, coercion will be necessary, as an expedient to counteract the most imminent evils. There are however various reasons that would incline a just man to confine the province of coercion within the severest limits. It is never to be regarded but as a temporary expedient, the necessity of having recourse to which is deeply to be regretted. It is an expedient, protecting one injustice, the accumulation of property, for the sake of keeping out another evil, still more formidable and destructive. Lastly, it is to be considered that this injustice, the unequal distribution of property, the grasping and selfish spirit of individuals, is to be regarded as one of the original sources of government, and, as it rises in its excesses, is continually demanding and necessitating new injustice, new penalties and new slavery.

Thus far then it should seem the system of coercion must be permitted to extend. We should set bounds to no man's accumulation. We should repress by wise and effectual, yet moderate and humane, penalties, all forcible invasion to be committed by one man upon the acquisitions of another. But it may be asked, are there not various laws or practices, established among civilized nations, which do not, like these we have described, stop at the toleration of unequal property, but which operate to its immediate encouragement, and to the rendering this inequality still wider and more oppressive?

What are we to conceive in this respect of the protection given to inheritance, and testamentary bequest? "There is no merit in being born the son of a rich man, rather than of a poor one, that should justify us in raising this man to affluence, and condemning that to invincible depression. Surely," we might be apt to exclaim, "it is enough to maintain men in their usurpation [for let it never be forgotten that accumulated property is usurpation], during the term of their lives. It is the most extravagant fiction, which would enlarge the empire of the proprietor beyond his natural existence, and enable him to dispose of events, when he is himself no longer in the world."

The arguments however that may be offered, in favour of the protection given to inheritance and testamentary bequest, are more forcible than might at first be imagined. We have attempted to show that men ought to be protected in the disposal of the property they have personally acquired; in expending it, in the necessities they require, or the luxuries in which they think proper to indulge; in transferring it, in such portions, as justice shall dictate, or their erroneous judgement suggest. To attempt therefore to take the disposal out of their hands, at the period of their decease, would be an abortive and pernicious project. If we prevented them from bestowing it in the open and explicit mode of bequest, we could not prevent them from transferring it before the close of their lives, and we should open a door to vexatious and perpetual litigation. Most persons would be inclined to bestow their property, after the period of their lives, upon their children or nearest relatives. Where therefore they have failed to express their sentiments in this respect, it is reasonable to presume what they would have been; and this disposal of the property on the part of the community is the mildest, and therefore the most justifiable, interference. Where they have expressed a capricious partiality, this iniquity also is, in most cases, to be protected, because, for the reasons above assigned, it cannot be prevented without exposing us to still greater iniquities.

But, though it may possibly be true, that inheritance, and the privilege of testation, are necessary consequences of the system of property in a community the members of which are involved in prejudice and ignorance, it will not be difficult to find the instances, in every political country of Europe, in which civil institution, instead of granting, to the inequalities of accumulation, only what could not prudently be withheld, has exerted itself, for the express purpose of rendering these inequalities greater and more oppressive. Such instances are, the feudal system, and the system of ranks, seignorial duties, fines, conveyances, entails, the distinction, in landed property, of freehold, copyhold and manor, the establishment of vassalage, and the claim

of primogeniture. We here distinctly recognize the policy of men who, having first gained a superiority, by means of the inevitable openings before cited, have made use of this superiority for the purpose of conspiring to monopolize whatever their rapacity could seize, in direct opposition to every dictate of the general interest. These articles fall under the distinction, brought forward in the outset,(12*) of laws or practices not common to all civilized communities, but peculiar to certain ages and countries.

It should seem therefore that these are institutions the abolition of which is not to be entirely trusted to the silent hostility of opinion, but that they are to be abrogated by the express and positive decision of the community. For their abrogation, it is not necessary that any new law or regulation should be promulgated, an operation which, to say the least, should always be regarded with extreme jealousy. Property, under every form it can assume, is upheld by the direct interference of institution; and that species which we at present contemplate must inevitably perish the moment the protection of the state is withdrawn. Of the introduction of new regulations of whatever description it becomes the friend of man to be jealous; but we may allow ourselves to regard with a more friendly eye a proceeding which consists merely in their abolition.

The conclusion however in this instance must not be pushed further than the premises will justify. The articles enumerated will perhaps, all of them, be found to tally with the condition annexed; they depend for their existence upon the positive protection of the state. But there are particulars which have grown up under their countenance that are of a different sort. Such, for instance, are titles, armorial bearings and liveries. If the community refuse to countenance feudal and seignorial claims, and the other substantial privileges of an aristocracy, they must inevitably cease. But the case is different in the instances last cited. It is one thing to abolish a law, or refuse to persist in a practice that is made the engine of tyranny; and a thing of a totally different sort, by a positive law to prohibit actions, however irrational, by which no man's security is directly invaded. It should seem unjustifiable to endeavour, by penalties, to deter a man from calling himself by any name, or attiring himself or others, with their own consent, in any manner he thinks proper. Not that these things are, as they have sometimes been represented, in their own nature trivial. We have endeavoured to prove the reverse of this.(13*) They ought to be assailed with every weapon of argument and ridicule. In an enlightened community, the man who assumes to himself a pompous appellation will be considered as a fool or a madman. But fulminations and penalties are not the proper instruments to repress an ecstasy of this sort.

There is another circumstance necessary to be stated, by way of qualification to the preceding conclusion. Evils often exist in a community, which, though mere excrescences at first, at length become so incorporated with the principle of social existence that they cannot suddenly be separated without the risk of involving the most dreadful calamities. Feudal rights, and the privileges of rank, are, in themselves considered, entitled to no quarter. The inequalities of property perhaps constituted a state through which it was at least necessary for us to pass, and which constituted the true original excitement to the unfolding the powers of the human mind.(14*) But it would be difficult to show that feudality and aristocracy ever produced an overbalance of good. Yet, were they to be suddenly and instantly abolished, two evils would necessarily follow. First, the abrupt reduction of thousands to a condition the reverse of that to which they had hitherto been accustomed, a condition, perhaps the most auspicious to human talent and felicity, but for which habit had wholly unfitted them, and which would be to them a continual source of dejection and suffering. It may be doubted whether the genuine cause of reform ever demands that, in its name, we should sentence whole classes of men to wretchedness. Secondly, an attempt abruptly to abolish practices which had originally no apology to plead for their introduction would be attended with as dreadful convulsions, and as melancholy a series of public calamities, as an attack upon the first principles of society itself. All the reasonings therefore which were formerly adduced under the head of revolutions(15*) are applicable to the present case.

Having now accomplished what was last proposed,(16*) and endeavoured to ascertain in what particulars the present system of property is to be considered as the capricious offspring of positive institution, let us return to the point which led us to that enquiry, the question concerning the degree of respect to which property in general is entitled. And here it is only necessary that we should recollect the principle in which the doctrine of property is founded, the sacred and indefeasible right of private judgement. There are but two objects for which government can rationally be conceived to have been originated: first, as a treasury of public wisdom, by which individuals might, in all cases, with advantage be directed, and which might actively lead us, with greater certainty, in the path of happiness: or, secondly, instead of being forward to act itself as an umpire, that the community might fill the humbler office of guardian of the rights of private judgement, and never interpose but when one man appeared, in this respect, alarmingly to encroach upon another. All the arguments of this work have tended to show that the latter, and not the former, is the true end of civil institution. The first idea of property then is a deduction from the right of private judgement; the first object of government is the preservation of this right. Without permitting to every man, to a considerable degree, the exercise of his own discretion, there can be no independence, no improvement, no virtue and no happiness. This is a privilege in the highest degree sacred; for its maintenance, no exertions and sacrifices can be too

great. Thus deep is the foundation of the doctrine of property. It is, in the last resort, the palladium of all that ought to be dear to us, and must never be approached but with awe and veneration. He that seeks to loosen the hold of this principle upon our minds, and that would lead us to sanction any exceptions to it without the most deliberate and impartial consideration, however right may be his intentions, is, in that instance an enemy to the whole. A condition indispensably necessary to every species of excellence is security. Unless I can foresee, in a considerable degree, the treatment I shall receive from my species, and am able to predict, to a certain extent, what will be the limits of their irregularity and caprice, I can engage in no valuable undertaking, civil society maintains a greater proportion of security among men than can be found in the savage state: this is one of the reasons why, under the shade of civil society, arts have been invented, sciences perfected and the nature of man, in his individual and relative capacity, gradually developed.

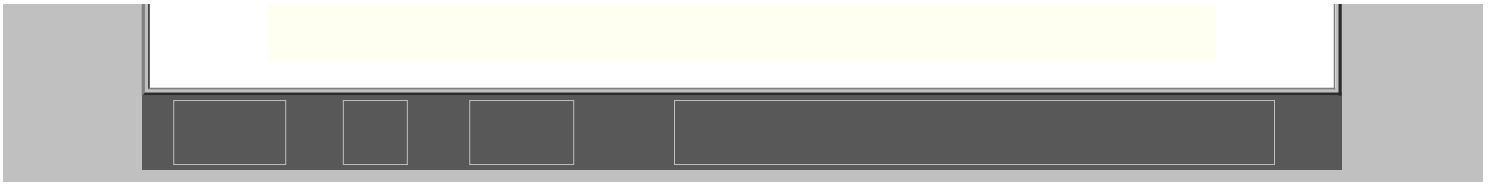
One observation it seems proper to add to the present chapter. We have maintained(17*) the equal rights of men, that each man has a perfect claim upon everything the possession of which will be productive of more benefit to him than injury to another. "Has he then" it will be asked, "a right to take it? If not, what sort of right is that which the person in whom it vests is not entitled to enforce?"

The difficulty here is in appearance, and not in reality. The feature specified in the present instance adheres to every department of right. It is right that my actions should be governed by the dictates of my own judgment: and every man is an intruder who endeavours to compel me to act by his judgement instead of my own. But it does not follow that I shall always do wisely or well in undertaking to repel his intrusion by force. Persuasion, and not force, is the legitimate instrument for influencing the human mind; and I shall never be justifiable in having recourse to the latter, while there is any rational hope of succeeding by the former. Add to which, the criterion of morals is utility. When it has once been determined that my being constituted the possessor of a certain article will be beneficial, it does not follow that my attempting, or even succeeding, violently to put myself in possession of it will be attended with a beneficial result. If I were quietly installed, it may be unquestionable that that would be an absolute benefit; and yet it may be true that my endeavours to put myself in possession, whether effectual or ineffectual, will be attended with worse consequences than all the good that would follow from right being done as to the object itself. The doctrine of rights has no rational or legitimate connection with the practice of tumult.

But, though I may not, consistently with rectitude, attempt to put myself in possession of many things which it is right I should have, yet this sort of right is by no means futile and nugatory. It may prove to be a great truth, resting upon irresistible evidence, and may, in that case, be expected to make hourly progress in the convictions of mankind. If it be true, it is an interesting truth, and may therefore be expected to germinate in the mind, and produce corresponding effects upon the conduct. It may appear to be a truth of that nature which is accustomed to sink deep in the human understanding, insensibly to mix itself with all our reasonings, and ultimately to produce, without shadow of violence, the most complete revolution in the maxims of civil society.

NOTES:

1. Book 11, Chap. V, VI.
2. Book II, Chap. V.
3. Book VI, Chap. VIII, p. 616.
4. Chap. VIII.
5. Book VI, Chap. 1.
6. Book 11, Chap. VI; Book VII, passim
7. Chap. I.
8. Book V, Chap. XXIV.
9. Book VII, Chap, V.
10. Book VII, Chap. V.
11. Vol. 1, Book IV, Chap. VI, App, No. 1.
12. p. 714.
13. Book V, Chap. XII.
14. Chap. VII.
15. Book IV, Chap. II.
16. p. 714.
17. Chap. I.





Of Property

William Godwin

[1793 / Chapter 3 / Part 3 of 7]

BENEFITS ATTENDANT ON A SYSTEM OF EQUALITY

Having seen the justice of an equal distribution of the good things of life, let us next proceed to consider, in detail, the benefits with which it would be attended. And here with grief it must be confessed that, however great and extensive are the evils that are produced by monarchies and courts,(1*) by the imposture of priests(2*) and the iniquity of criminal laws,(3*) all these are imbecile and impotent compared with the evils that arise out of the established administration of property.

Its first effect is that we have already mentioned,(4*) a sense of dependence. It is true that courts are mean-spirited, intriguing and servile, and that this disposition is transferred by contagion from them to all ranks of society. But accumulation brings home a servile and truckling spirit, by no circuitous method, to every house in the nation. Observe the pauper fawning with abject vileness upon his rich benefactor, speechless with sensations of gratitude, for having received that which he ought to have claimed, not indeed with arrogance, or a dictatorial and overbearing temper, but with the spirit of a man discussing with a man, and resting his cause only on the justice of his claim. Observe the servants that follow in a rich man's train, watchful of his looks, anticipating his commands, not daring to reply to his insolence, all their time and their efforts under the direction of his caprice. Observe the tradesman, how he studies the passions of his customers, not to correct, but to pamper them, the vileness of his flattery and the systematical constancy with which he exaggerates the merit of his commodities. Observe the practices of a popular election, where the great mass are purchased by obsequiousness, by intemperance and bribery, or driven by unmanly threats of poverty and persecution. Indeed 'the age of chivalry is' not 'gone'!(5*) The feudal spirit still survives that reduced the great mass of mankind to the rank of slaves and cattle for the service of a few.

We have heard much of visionary and theoretical improvements. It would indeed be visionary to expect integrity from mankind while they are thus subjected to hourly corruption, and bred, from father to son, to sell their independence and their conscience for the vile rewards that oppression has to bestow. No man can be either useful to others, or happy in himself, who is a stranger to the grace of firmness, or who is not habituated to prefer the dictates of his own understanding to the tyranny of command, and the allurements of temptation. Here again, as upon a former occasion,(6*) religion comes in to illustrate our thesis. Religion was the generous ebullition of men who let their imagination loose on the grandest subjects, and wandered without restraint in the unbounded field of enquiry. It is not to be wondered at therefore if they brought home imperfect ideas of the sublimest views that intellect can furnish. In this instance, religion teaches that the pure perfection of man is to arm himself against the power of sublunary enticements and sublunary terrors; that he must suffer no artificial wants, sensuality, or fear, to come in competition with the dictates of rectitude and reflection. But to expect a constancy of this sort from the human species, under the present system, is an extravagant speculation. The enquirer after truth, and the benefactor of mankind, will be desirous of removing from them those external impressions by which their evil propensities are cherished. The true object that should be kept in view is to extirpate all ideas of condescension and superiority, to oblige every man to feel that the kindness he exerts is what he is bound to perform, and to examine whether the assistance he asks be what he has a right to claim.

A second evil that arises out of the established administration of property is the continual spectacle of injustice it exhibits. The effect of this consists partly in the creation of wrong propensities, and partly in a hostility to right ones. There is nothing more pernicious to the human mind than the love of opulence. Essentially active

when the original cravings of appetite have been satisfied, we necessarily fix on some object of pursuit, benevolent or personal, and, in the latter case, on the attainment of some excellence, or something which shall command the esteem and deference of others. Few propensities, absolutely considered, can be more valuable than this. But the established administration of property directs it into the channel of the acquisition of wealth. The ostentation of the rich perpetually goads the spectator to the desire of opulence. Wealth, by the sentiments of servility and dependence it produces, makes the rich man stand forward as the principal object of general esteem and deference. In vain are sobriety, integrity and industry, in vain the sublimest powers of mind, and the most ardent benevolence, if their possessor be narrow in his circumstances. To acquire wealth and to display it is therefore the universal passion. The whole structure of human society is made a system of the narrowest selfishness. If the state of society were such that self-love and benevolence were apparently reconciled as to their object, a man might then set out with the desire of eminence, and yet become every day more generous and philanthropical in his views. But the passion we are here describing is accustomed to be gratified at every step by inhumanly trampling upon the interest of others. Wealth is acquired by overreaching our neighbour, and is spent in insulting him.

The spectacle of injustice which the established administration of property exhibits operates also in the way of hostility to right propensities. If you would cherish in any man the love of rectitude, you must see that its principles be impressed on him, not only by words, but actions. It happens perhaps, during the period of education, that maxims of integrity and consistency are repeatedly enforced, and the preceptor gives no quarter to the base suggestions of selfishness and cunning. But how is the lesson that has been read to the pupil confounded and reversed when he enters upon the scene of the world? If he ask, 'Why is this man honoured?' the ready answer is, 'Because he is rich.' If he enquire further, 'Why is he rich?' the answer, in most cases, is, 'From the accident of birth, or from a minute and sordid attention to the cares of gain.' Humanity weeps over the distresses of the peasantry in all civilized nations; and, when she turns from this spectacle, to behold the luxury of their lords, gross, imperious and prodigal, her sensations certainly are not less acute. This spectacle is the school in which mankind have been educated. They have been accustomed to the sight of injustice, oppression and iniquity, till their feelings are made callous, and their understandings incapable of apprehending the principles of virtue.

In beginning to point out the evils of accumulated property, we compared the extent of those evils with the correspondent evils of monarchies and courts.(7*) No circumstances, under the latter, have excited a more pointed disapprobation than pensions and pecuniary corruption, by means of which hundreds of individuals are rewarded, not for serving, but betraying the public, and the hard earnings of industry are employed to fatten the servile but they are paid for being dissipated and indolent. The most powerful means that malignity could have invented are employed to prevent them from improving their talents, and becoming useful to the public.

This leads us to observe, thirdly, that the established administration of property is the true levelling system with respect to the human species, by as much as the cultivation of intellect is more valuable, and more characteristic of man, than the gratifications of vanity or appetite. Accumulated property treads the powers of thought in the dust, extinguishes the sparks of genius, and reduces the great mass of mankind to be immersed in sordid cares; beside depriving the rich, as we have already said, of the most salubrious and effectual motives to activity. If superfluity were banished, the necessity for the greater part of the manual industry of mankind would be superseded; and the rest, being amicably shared among the active and vigorous members of the community, would be burthensome to none. Every man would have a frugal, yet wholesome diet; every man would go forth to that moderate exercise of his corporal functions that would give hilarity to the spirits; none would be made torpid with fatigue, but all would have leisure to cultivate the kindly and philanthropical affections, and to let loose his faculties in the search of intellectual improvement. What a contrast does this scene present to the present state of society, where the peasant and the labourer work till their understandings are benumbed with toil, their sinews contracted and made callous by being for ever on the stretch, and their bodies invaded with infirmities, and surrendered to an untimely grave? What is the fruit they obtain from this disproportioned and unceasing toil? In the evening they return to a family, famished with hunger, exposed half naked to the inclemencies of the sky, hardly sheltered, and denied the slenderest instruction, unless in a few instances, where it is dispensed by the hands of ostentatious charity, and the first lesson communicated is unprincipled servility. All this while their rich neighbour -- but we visited him before.(8*)

How rapid would be the advances of intellect if all men were admitted into the field of knowledge? At present ninety-nine persons in a hundred are no more excited to any regular exertions of general and curious thought than the brutes themselves. What would be the state of public mind in a nation where all were wise, all had laid aside the shackles of prejudice and implicit faith, all adopted, with fearless confidence, the suggestions of reason, and the lethargy of the soul was dismissed for ever? It is to be presumed that the inequality of mind would, in a certain degree, be permanent; but it is reasonable to believe that the geniuses of such an age

would greatly surpass the utmost exertions of intellect hitherto known. Genius would not be depressed with false wants and niggardly patronage. It would not exert itself with a sense of neglect and oppression rankling in its bosom. It would be delivered from those apprehensions that perpetually recall us to the thought of personal emolument; and, of consequence, would expatiate freely among sentiments of generosity and public good.

From ideas of intellectual, let us turn to moral, improvement. And here it is obvious that the great occasions of crime would be cut off for ever.(9*)

The fruitful source of crimes consists in this circumstance, one man's possessing in abundance that of which another man is destitute. We must change the nature of mind before we can prevent it from being powerfully influenced by this circumstance, when brought strongly home to its perceptions by the nature of its situation. Man must cease to have senses, the pleasures of appetite and vanity must cease to gratify, before he can look on tamely at the monopoly of these pleasures. He must cease to have a sense of justice, before he can clearly and fully approve this mixed scene of superfluity and want. It is true that the proper method of curing this inequality is by reason and not by violence. But the immediate tendency of the established administration is to persuade men that reason is impotent. The injustice of which they complain is upheld by force; and they are too easily induced by force to attempt its correction. All they endeavour is the partial correction of an injustice which education tells them is necessary, but more powerful reason affirms to be tyrannical.

Force grew out of monopoly. It might accidentally have occurred among savages, whose appetites exceeded their supply, or whose passions were inflamed by the presence of the object of their desire; but it would gradually have died away, as reason and civilization advanced. Accumulated property has fixed its empire; and henceforth all is an open contention of the strength and cunning of one party against the strength and cunning of the other. In this case, the violent and premature struggles of the necessitous are undoubtedly an evil. They tend to defeat the very cause in the success of which they are most deeply interested; they tend to procrastinate the triumph of justice. But the true crime, in every instance, is in the selfish and partial propensities of men, thinking only of themselves, and despising the emolument of others; and, of these, the rich have their share.

The spirit of oppression, the spirit of servility, and the spirit of fraud, these are the immediate growth of the established administration of property. They are alike hostile to intellectual and moral improvement. The other vices of envy, malice and revenge are their inseparable companions. In a state of society where men lived in the midst of plenty, and where all shared alike the bounties of nature, these sentiments would inevitably expire. The narrow principle of selfishness would vanish. No man being obliged to guard his little store, or provide, with anxiety and pain, for his restless wants, each would lose his individual existences in the thought of the general good. No man would be an enemy to his neighbour, for they would have no subject of contention and of consequence, philanthropy would resume the empire which reason assigns her. Mind would be delivered from her perpetual anxiety about corporal support, and free to expatiate in the field of thought which is congenial to her. Each would assist the enquiries of all.

Let us fix our attention, for a moment, upon the alteration of principles and habits that immediately grows out of an unequal distribution of property. Till it was thus distributed, men felt what their wants required, and sought the supply of those wants. All that was more than this was regarded as indifferent. But no sooner is accumulation introduced than they begin to study a variety of methods, for disposing of their superfluity with least emolument to their neighbour, or, in other words by which it shall appear to be most their own. They do not long continue to buy commodities before they begin to buy men. He that possesses, or is the spectator of, superfluity, soon discovers the hold which it affords him on the minds of others. Hence the passions of vanity and ostentation. Hence the despotic manners of such, as recollect with complacence the rank they occupy; and the restless ambition of those, whose attention is engrossed by the possible future.

Ambition is, of all the passions of the human mind, the most, extensive in its ravages. It adds district to district, and kingdom to kingdom. It spreads bloodshed and calamity and conquest over the face of the earth. But the passion itself, as well as the means of gratifying it, is the produce of the prevailing administration of property. (10*) It is only by means of accumulation that one man obtains an unresisted sway over multitudes of others. It is by means of a certain distribution of income that the present governments of the world are retained in existence. Nothing more easy than to plunge nations, so organized, into war. But, if Europe were at present covered with inhabitants all of them possessing competence, and none of them superfluity, what could induce its different countries to engage in hostility? If you would lead men to war, you must exhibit certain allurements. If you be not enabled, by a system already prevailing, and which derives force from prescription, to hire them to your purposes, you must bring over each individual by dint of persuasion. How hopeless a task by such means to excite mankind to murder each other? It is clear then that war, in all its aggravations, is

the growth of unequal property. As long as this source of jealousy and corruption shall remain, it is visionary to talk of universal peace. As soon as the source shall be dried up, it will be impossible to exclude the consequence. It is accumulation that forms men into one common mass, and makes them fit to be played upon like a brute machine. Were this stumbling-block removed, each man would be united to his neighbour, in love and mutual kindness, a thousand times more than now: but each man would think and judge for himself. Let then the advocates for the prevailing administration at least consider what it is for which they plead, and be well assured that they have arguments in its favour which will weigh against these disadvantages.

There is one other circumstance which, though inferior to those above enumerated, deserves to be mentioned. This is population. It has been calculated that the average cultivation of Europe might be so improved as to maintain five times her present number of inhabitants.(11*) There is a principle in human society by which population is perpetually kept down to the level of the means of subsistence. Thus, among the wandering tribes of America and Asia, we never find, through the lapse of ages, that population has so increased as to render necessary the cultivation of the earth, Thus, among the civilized nations of Europe, by means of territorial monopoly, the sources of subsistence are kept within a certain limit, and, if the population became overstocked, the lower ranks of the inhabitants would be still more incapable of procuring for themselves the necessaries of life. There are, no doubt extraordinary concurrences of circumstances by means of which changes are occasionally introduced in this respect; but, in ordinary cases, the standard of population is held, in a manner, stationary for centuries. Thus the established administration of property may be considered as strangling a considerable portion of our children in their cradle. Whatever may be the value of the life of man, or rather whatever would be his capability of happiness in a free and equal state of society, the system we are here opposing may be considered as arresting, upon the threshold of existence, four fifths of that value and that happiness.

NOTES:

1. Book V.
2. Book VI.
3. Book VII.
4. Chap. I.
5. Burke's Reflections.
6. Chap. I.
7. p. 725>
8. p. 728
9. Book I, Chap. III
10. Book V, Chap. XVI



Of Property

William Godwin

[1793 / Chapters 4, 5 and 6 / Part 4 of 7]

CHAPTER IV

Objection to this System from the Frailty of the Human Mind

Having proceeded thus far in our investigation, it may be proper to recapitulate the principles already established. The discussion, under each of its branches, as it relates to the equality of men,(1*) and the inequalities of property,(2*) may be considered as a discussion either of right or duty; and, in that respect, runs parallel to the two great heads of which we treated in our original development of the principles of society.(3*) I have a right to the assistance of my neighbour; he has a right that it should not be extorted from him by force. It is his duty to afford me the supply of which I stand in need; it is my duty not to violate his province in determining, first, whether he is to supply me, and, secondly, in what degree.

Equality of conditions, or, in other words, an equal admission to the means of improvement and pleasure, is a law rigorously enjoined upon mankind by the voice of justice. All other changes in society are good, only as they are fragments of this, or steps to its attainment. All other existing abuses are to be deprecated, only as they serve to increase and perpetuate the inequality of conditions.

We have however arrived at another truth not less evident than this. Equality of conditions cannot be produced by individual compulsion, and ought not to be produced by compulsion in the name of the whole. There remains therefore but one mode of arriving at this great end of justice and most essential improvement of society, and that consists in rendering the cession by him that has to him that wants an unrestrained and voluntary action. There remain but two instruments for producing this volition, the illumination of the understanding and the love of distinction.

These instruments have commonly been supposed wholly inadequate to their object. It has usually been treated as 'the most visionary of all systems, to expect the rich to "sell all that they have, and give to the poor". (4*) It is one thing to convince men that a given conduct, on their part, would be most conducive to the general interest, and another to persuade them actively to postpone, to considerations of general interest, every idea of personal ambition or pleasure. The sober calculator will often doubt whether it be reasonable, in consistence with the nature of a human being, to expect from him such a sacrifice: and the man of a lively and impetuous temper, even when satisfied that it is his duty, will be in hourly danger of deserting it, at the invitation of some allurements, too powerful for mortal frailty to resist.'

There is certainly considerable force in this statement; and there is good reason to believe, though the human mind be unquestionably accessible to disinterested motives,(5*) that virtue would be in most instances an impracticable refinement; were it not that self-love and social, however different in themselves, are found upon strict examination to prescribe the same system of conduct.

But this observation by no means removes the difficulty intended to be suggested in the objection. 'Though frugality, moderation and plainness may be the joint dictate of these two authorities, yet it is the property of the human mind to be swayed by things present more than by things absent. In affairs of religion, we often find men indulging themselves in offences of small gratification, in spite of all the threats that can be held out to them of eternal damnation. It is in vain that, for the most part, you would preach the pleasures of abstinence

amidst the profusion of a feast; or the unsubstantialness of fame and power to him who is tortured with the goadings of ambition. The case is similar to that of the exacerbations of grief, the attempt to cure which by the consolations of philosophy has been a source of inexhaustible ridicule.'

The answer to these remarks has been anticipated.(6*) The ridicule lies in supposing the endeavour to cure a man of his weakness to consist in one phlegmatic and solitary expostulation, instead of conceiving it to be accompanied with the vigour of conscious truth, and the progressive regularity of a course of instruction.

Let us take up the subject in a view, in some degree varying from that in which it was formerly considered. We have endeavoured to establish, in the commencement of the present book, the principles of justice, relative to the distribution of the goods of fortune. Let us enquire Whether the principles there delivered can be made productive of conviction to the rich; whether they can be made productive of conviction, in cases not immediately connected with personal interest; and whether they can be made productive of conviction to the poor?

Is it possible for a rich man to see that the costly gratifications in which he indulges are comparatively of little value, and that he may arrive at everything that is most essential in happiness or pleasure, by means of the three other sources formerly enumerated,(7*) subsistence, unexpensive gratifications, and the means of intellectual and moral improvement? Is it possible for him to understand the calculation, 'in every glass that he drinks, and every ornament that he annexes to his person', of 'how many individuals have been condemned to slavery and sweat, incessant drudgery, unwholesome food, continual hardships, deplorable ignorance and brutal insensibility, that he may be supplied with these luxuries'?(8*) Is it possible for a man to have these ideas so repeatedly suggested to his mind, so strongly impressed, and so perpetually haunting him, as finally to induce a rich man to desire, with respect to personal gratifications, to live as if he were a poor one? It is not conceivable but that every one of these questions must be answered in the affirmative.

Be it observed by the way that the motives for a rich man to live as if he were a poor one are very inferior now to what they would be when a general sympathy upon this subject had taken place, and a general illumination had diffused itself.

If then it be possible for a rich man, from the mere apprehensions of justice, voluntarily to desire to live as if he were a poor one, we shall have still less hesitation in affirming that a sentiment of justice in this matter may be made productive of conviction, in cases not immediately connected with personal interest, and of conviction to the poor.

Undoubtedly an apprehension of the demands of justice in this respect has some tendency to the instigation of violence and tumult, were we not to suppose the gradual development of this impression to be accompanied with a proportionable improvement of the mind in other respects, and a slow, but incessant, melioration of the institutions and practices of society. With this supposition, it could not however fail to happen that, in proportion as the prejudices and ignorance of the great mass of society declined, the credit of wealth, and the reverent admiration with which it is now contemplated, must also decline. But, in proportion as it lost credit with the great mass of society, it would relax its hold upon the minds of those who possess it, or have the means of acquiring it. We have already seen(9*) that the great incitement to the acquisition of wealth is the love of distinction. Suppose then that, instead of the false glare which wealth, through the present puerility of the human mind, reflects on its possessor, his conduct in amassing and monopolizing it were seen in its true light. We should not then demand his punishment, but we should look on him as a man uninitiated in the plainest sentiments of reason. He would not be pointed at with the finger, or hooted as he passed along through the resorts of men, but he would incited to the same assiduity in hiding his acquisitions then as he employs in displaying them now. He would be regarded with no terror, for his conduct would appear too absurd to excite imitation. Add to which, his acquisitions would be small, as the independent spirit and sound discretion of mankind would allow but little chance of his being able to retain them in his service, as now, by generously rewarding them with a part of the fruit of their own labours. Thus it appears, with irresistible probability, when the subject of wealth shall be understood, and correct ideas respecting it familiarized to the human mind, that the present disparity of conditions will subside, by a gradual and incessant progress, into its true level.

NOTES:

1. Chap. I, III.
2. Chap. II.
3. Book II, Chap. IV, V.
4. Mark, ch. X, ver. 21

5. Book IV, Chap. X.
6. Book I Chap, V. § 3.
7. Chap. I.
8. Chap. II.
9. Chap. I.

CHAPTER V

Objection to This System from the Question of Permanence

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 neighbour 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 neighbours 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 a 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 neighbours, 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.

CHAPTER VI

Objection to this System from the Allurements of Sloth

Another objection which has been urged against the system which counteracts the accumulation of property, is, "that it would put an end to industry. We behold, in commercial countries, the miracles that are operated by the love of gain. Their inhabitants cover the sea with their fleets, astonish mankind by the refinements of their ingenuity, hold vast continents in subjection, in distant parts of the world, by their arms, are able to defy the most powerful confederacies, and, oppressed with taxes and debts, seem to acquire fresh prosperity under their accumulated burthens. Shall we lightly part with a motive which appears so great and stupendous in its influence? Once establish it as a principle in society, that no man apply to his personal use more than his necessities require; and every man will become indifferent to the exertions which now call forth the energy of his faculties. Once establish it as a principle, that each man, without being compelled to exert his own powers, is entitled to partake of the superfluity of his neighbour; and indolence will speedily become universal. Such a society must either starve, or be obliged, in its own defence, to return to that system of monopoly and sordid interest, which theoretical reasoners will for ever arraign to no purpose."

In reply to this objection, the reader must again be reminded that the equality for which we are pleading, is an equality which would succeed to a state of great intellectual improvement. So bold a revolution cannot take place in human affairs, till the general mind has been highly cultivated. Hasty and undigested tumults, may be produced by a superficial idea of equalization; but it is only a clear and calm conviction of justice, of justice mutually to be rendered and received, of happiness to be produced by the desertion of our most rooted habits, that can introduce an invariable system of this sort. Attempts, without this preparation, will be productive only of confusion. Their effect will be momentary, and a new and more barbarous inequality will succeed. Each man, with unaltered appetite, will watch the opportunity, to gratify his love of power or of distinction, by usurping on his inattentive neighbours.

Is it to be believed then that a state of so great intellectual improvement, can be the forerunner of universal ignorance and brutality? Savages, it is true, are subject to the weakness of indolence. But civilized and refined states are the theatre of a peculiar activity. It is thought, acuteness of disquisition, and ardour of pursuit, that set the corporeal faculties at work. Thought begets thought. Nothing perhaps can put a stop to the advances of mind but oppression. But here, so far from being oppressed, every man is equal, every man independent and at his case. It has been observed, that the introduction of a republican government, is attended with public enthusiasm and irresistible enterprise. Is it to be believed that equality, the true republicanism, will be less effectual? It is true, that in republics this spirit, sooner or later, is found to languish. Republicanism is not a remedy that strikes at the root of the evil. Injustice, oppression and misery can find an abode in those seeming happy seats. But what shall stop the progress of ardour and improvement where the monopoly of property is unknown?

This argument will be strengthened, if we reflect on the amount of labour that a state of equality will require. What is this quantity of exertion, from which the objection supposes many individuals to shrink? It is so light, as rather to assume the guise of agreeable relaxation and gentle exercise, than of labour. In such a community,

scarcely anyone can be expected, in consequence of his situation or avocations, to consider himself as exempted from the obligation to manual industry. There will be no rich man to recline in indolence, and fatten upon the labour of his fellows. The mathematician, the poet and the philosopher will derive a new stock of cheerfulness and energy from the recurring labour that makes them feel they are men. There will be no persons devoted to the manufacture of trinkets and luxuries; and none whose office it should be to keep in motion the complicated machine of government, tax-gatherers, beadles, excise-men, tide-waiters, clerks and secretaries. There will be neither fleets nor armies, neither courtiers nor lacqueys. It is the unnecessary employments that, at present, occupy the great mass of every civilized nation, while the peasant labours incessantly to maintain them in a state more pernicious than idleness.

It may be computed that not more than one twentieth of the inhabitants of England, is substantially employed in the labours of agriculture. Add to this, that the nature of agriculture is such, as to give full occupation in some parts of the year, and to leave other parts comparatively vacant. We may consider the latter as equivalent to a labour, which, under the direction of sufficient skill, might suffice, in a simple state of society, for the fabrication of tools, for weaving, and the occupation of taylor, bakers and butchers. The object, in the present state of society, is to multiply labour; in another state, it will be to simplify it. A vast disproportion of the wealth of the community, has been thrown into the hands of a few; and ingenuity has been continually upon the stretch, to find ways in which it may be expended. In the feudal times, the great lord invited the poor to come and eat of the produce of his estate, upon condition of wearing his livery, and forming themselves in rank and file to do honour to his well born guests. Now that exchanges are more facilitated, he has quitted this is inartificial mode, and obliges the men who are maintained from his income to exert their ingenuity and industry in return. Thus, in the instance just mentioned, he pays the taylor to cut his clothes to pieces that he may sew them together again, and to decorate them with stitching and various ornaments, without which they would be, in no respect, less convenient and useful. We are imagining, in the present case, a state of the most rigid simplicity.

From the sketch which has been given, it seems by no means impossible, that the labour of every twentieth man in the community, would be sufficient to supply to the rest all the absolute necessaries of life. If then this labour, instead of performed by so small a number, were amicably divided among the whole, it would occupy the twentieth part of every man's time. Let us compute that the industry of a labouring man, engrosses ten hours in every day, which, when we have deducted his hours of rest, recreation and meals, seems an ample allowance. It follows that half an hour a day employed in manual labour by every member of the community would sufficiently supply the whole with necessaries. Who is there that would shrink from this degree of industry? Who is there, that sees the incessant industry exerted in this city and island, and would believe, that, with half an hour's industry per diem, the sum of happiness to the community at large might be much greater than at present? Is it possible to contemplate this fair and generous picture of independence and virtue, where every man would have ample leisure for the noblest energies of mind, without feeling our very souls refreshed with admiration and hope?

When we talk of men's sinking into idleness, if they be not excited by the stimulus of gain, we seem to have little considered the motives that, at present, govern the human mind. We are deceived by the apparent mercenariness of mankind, and imagine that the accumulation of wealth is their great object. But it has sufficiently appeared that the present ruling passion of man is the love of distinction.(1*) There is, no doubt, a class in society that is perpetually urged by hunger and need, and has no leisure for motives less gross and material. But is the class next above them less industrious than they? Will any man affirm that the mind of the peasant is as far removed from inaction and sloth, as the mind of the general or statesman, of the natural philosopher who macerates himself with perpetual study, or the poet, the bard of Mantua for example, who can never believe that he has sufficiently revised, reconsidered and polished his compositions?

In reality, those by whom this reasoning has been urged, have mistaken the nature of their own objection. They did not suppose, that men could be roused into action only by the love of gain; but they conceived that, in a state of equality, men would have nothing to occupy their attention. What degree of truth there is in this idea we shall presently have occasion to estimate.(2*)

Meanwhile, it is sufficiently obvious, that the motives which arise from the love of distinction, are by no means cut off, by a state of society incompatible with the accumulation of property. Men, no longer able to acquire the esteem, or avoid the contempt, of their neighbours, by circumstances of dress and furniture, will divert the passion for distinction into another channel. They will avoid the reproach of indolence, as carefully as they now avoid the reproach of poverty. The only persons who, at present, neglect the effect which their appearance and manners may produce are those whose faces are ground with famine and distress. But, in a state of equal society, no man will be oppressed, and, of consequence, the more delicate affections will have time to expand themselves. The general mind having, as we have already shown, arrived at a high degree of

improvement, the impulse that carries it into action, will be stronger. The fervour of public spirit will be great. Leisure will be multiplied; and the leisure of a cultivated understanding, is the precise period in which great designs, designs the tendency of which is to secure applause and esteem, are conceived. In tranquil leisure, it is impossible for any but the sublimest mind, to exist, without the passion for distinction. This passion, no longer permitted to lose itself in indirect channels and useless wanderings, will seek the noblest course, and perpetually fructify the seeds of public good. Mind, though it will perhaps at no time arrive at the termination of its possible discoveries and improvements, will nevertheless advance with a rapidity and firmness of progression of which we are, at present, unable to conceive the idea.

The love of fame is no doubt a delusion. This, like every other delusion, will take its turn to be detected and abjured. It is an airy phantom, which will indeed afford us an imperfect pleasure so long as we worship it, but will always, in a considerable degree, disappoint us, and will not stand the test of examination. We ought to love nothing but a substantial happiness, that happiness which will bear the test of recollection, and which no clearness of perception, and improvement of understanding, will tend to undermine. If there be any principle more substantial than the rest, it is justice, a principle that rests upon this single postulatam, that man and man are beings of the same nature, and susceptible, under certain limitations, of the same advantages. Whether the benefit which is added to the common flock, proceed from you or me, is a pitiful distinction. Fame therefore is an unsubstantial and delusive pursuit. If it signify an opinion entertained of me greater than I deserve, to desire it is vicious. If it be the precise mirror of my character, it is valuable only as a means, in as much as I shall be able most essentially to benefit those, who best know the extent of my capacity, and the rectitude of my intentions.

The love of fame, when it perishes in minds formed under the present system, often gives place to a principle still more reprehensible. Selfishness is the habit that grows out of monopoly. When therefore selfishness ceases to seek its gratification in public exertion, it too often narrows into some frigid conception of personal pleasure, perhaps sensual, perhaps intellectual. But this cannot be the process where monopoly is banished. Selfishness has there no kindly circumstances to foster it. Truth, the overpowering truth of general good, then seizes its irresistibly. It is impossible we should want motives, so long as we see clearly how multitudes and ages may be benefited by our exertions, how causes and effects are connected in an endless chain, so that no honest effort can be lost, but will operate to good, centuries after its author is consigned to the grave.(3*) This will be the general passion, and all will be animated by the example of all.

Footnotes

1. Book VIII, Chap. I.
2. Book VIII, Chap. VII, VIII.
3. Book IV, Chap. X.



Of Property

William Godwin

[1793 / Chapters 7-8, and Appendix / Part 5 of 7]

CHAPTER VII

Objection to this System from the Benefits of Luxury

The objections we have hitherto examined, attack the practicability of a system of equality. But there are not wanting reasoners, the tendency of whose arguments is to show that, omitting the practicability, it is not even desirable. One of the objections they advance, is as follows.

They lay it down as a maxim, in the first instance, and the truth of this maxim we shall not contend with them, "that refinement is better than ignorance. It is better to be a man than a brute. Those attributes therefore, which separate the man from the brute, are most worthy of our affection and cultivation. Elegance of taste, refinement of sentiment, depth of penetration, and largeness of science, are among the noblest ornaments of man. But all these," say they, "are connected with inequality; they are the growth of luxury. It is luxury, by which palaces are built, and cities peopled. It is for the purpose of obtaining a share of the luxury which he witnesses in his richer neighbours, that the artificer exerts the refinements of his skill. To this cause we are indebted, for the arts of architecture, painting, music and poetry. Art would never have been cultivated, if a state of inequality had not enabled some men to purchase, and excited others to acquire the talent which was necessary to sell. In a state of equality, we must always have remained, and with equality restored, we must again become, barbarians. Thus we see (as in the system of optimism^(1*)) disorder, selfishness, monopoly and distress, all of them seeming discords, contributing to the admirable harmony and magnificence of the whole. The intellectual improvement and enlargement we witness and hope for, was worth purchasing at the expence of partial injustice and distress."^(2*)

This view of the subject, under various forms, has been very extensive in its effects. It probably contributed to make Rousseau an advocate of the savage state. Undoubtedly, we must not permit ourselves to think slightly, of the mischiefs that accrue from a state of inequality. If it be necessary that the great mass of mankind should be condemned to slavery, and, stranger still, to ignorance, that a few may be enlightened, certainly those moralists are not to be blamed, who doubted whether perpetual rudeness were not preferable to such a gift. Fortunately this is by no means the real alternative.

Perhaps a state of luxury, such as is here described, and a state of inequality, might be a stage through which it was necessary to pass, in order to arrive at the goal of civilisation. The only security we can ultimately have for an equality of conditions, is a general persuasion of the iniquity of accumulation, and the uselessness of wealth, in the purchase of happiness. But this persuasion could not be established in a savage state; nor indeed can it be maintained, if we should fall back into barbarism. It was the spectacle of inequality, that first excited the grossness of barbarians to persevering exertion, as a means of acquiring. It was persevering exertion, that first gave the reality, and the sense, of that leisure, which has served the purposes of literature and art.

But, though inequality were necessary as the prelude to civilisation, it is not necessary to its support. We may throw down the scaffolding, when the edifice is complete. We have at large endeavoured to show,^(3*) that the love of our fellow men, the love of distinction, and whatever motive is most allied to the energies of the human mind, will remain, when the enchantments of wealth are dissolved. He who has tasted the pleasures of refinement and knowledge, will not relapse into ignorance.

The better to understand the futility of the present objection, it may be proper to enter into a more accurate consideration of the sense of the term luxury. It depends upon the meaning in which it is understood, to determine whether it is to be regarded as a virtue or a vice. If we understand by a luxury, something which is to be enjoyed exclusively by some, at the expence of undue privations, and a partial burthen upon others; to indulge ourselves in luxury is then a vice. But, if we understand by luxury, which is frequently the case, every accommodation which is not absolutely necessary to maintain us in sound and healthful existence, the procuring and communication of luxuries may then be virtuous. The end of virtue, is to add to the sum of pleasurable sensation. The beacon and regulator of virtue, is impartiality, that we shall not give that exertion to procure the pleasure of an individual, which might have been employed in procuring the pleasure of many individuals. Within these limits every man is laudably employed, who procures to himself or his neighbour a real accession of pleasure; and he is censurable, who neglects any occasion of being so employed. We ought not to study that we may live, but to live that we may replenish existence with the greatest number of unallayed, exquisite and substantial enjoyments.

Let us apply these reflections to the state of equality we have endeavoured to delineate. It appeared in that delineation⁴, that the labour of half an hour per diem on the part of every individual in the community, would probably be sufficient to procure for all the necessaries of life. This quantity of industry therefore, though prescribed by no law, and enforced by no direct penalty, would be most powerfully imposed upon the strong in intellect, by a sense of justice, and upon the weak, by a sense of shame. After this, how would men spend the remainder of their time? Not probably in idleness, not all men, and the whole of their time, in the pursuit of intellectual attainments. There are many things, the fruit of human industry, which, though not to be classed among the necessaries of life, are highly conducive to our well being. The criterion of these things will appear, when we have ascertained what those accommodations are which will give us real pleasure, after the insinuations of vanity and ostentation shall have dismissed. A considerable portion of time would probably be dedicated, in an enlightened community, to the production of such accommodations. A labour of this sort is perhaps not inconsistent with the most desirable state of human existence. Laborious employment is a calamity now, because it is imperiously prescribed upon men as the condition of their existence, and because it shuts them out from a fair participation in the means of knowledge and improvement. When it shall be rendered in the strictest sense voluntary, when it shall cease to interfere with our improvement, and rather become a part of it, or at worst be converted into a source of amusement and variety, it may then be no longer a calamity, but a benefit. Thus it appears that a state of equality need not be a state of Stoical simplicity, but is compatible with considerable accommodation, and even, in some sense, with splendour; at least, if by splendour we understand copiousness of accommodation, and variety of invention for the purposes of accommodation. Those persons therefore who may be concluded to have small appearance of reason, who confound such a state with the state of the savage; or who suppose that the acquisition of the former, is to be considered as having a tendency to lead to the latter.

NOTES:

1. Book IV, Chap. XI.
2. The great champion of this doctrine is Mandeville. It is not however easy to determine, whether he is seriously, or only ironically, the defender of the present system of society. His principal work (Fable of the Bees) is highly worthy the attention of every man, who would learn profoundly to philosophise upon human affairs. No author has displayed, in stronger terms, the deformity of existing abuses, or proved more satisfactorily how inseparably these abuses are connected together. Hume (Essays; Part II, Essay II) has endeavoured to communicate to the Mandevilian system his own lustre and brilliancy of colouring. But it has unfortunately happened, that what he adds in beauty he has subtracted from profoundness. The profoundness of Hume, which has never been surpassed, and which ranks him with the most illustrious and venerable of men, is for the most part the profoundness of logical distinction, rather than of moral analysis.
3. Book VIII, Chap. I, IV, VI.
4. Book VIII, Chap. VI.

CHAPTER VIII

Objection to this System from the Inflexibility of its Restrictions

An objection that has often been urged against a system of equality, is, "that it is inconsistent with personal independence. Every man, according to this scheme, is a passive instrument in the hands of the community. He must eat and drink, and play and sleep, at the bidding of others. He has no habitation, no period at which

he can retreat into himself, and not ask another's leave. He has nothing that he can call his own, not even his time or his person. Under the appearance of a perfect freedom from oppression and tyranny, he is in reality subjected to this most unlimited slavery."

To understand the force of this objection it is necessary that we should distinguish two sorts of independence, one of which may be denominated natural, and the other moral. Natural independence, a freedom from all constraint, except that of reasons and inducements presented to this understanding, is of the utmost importance to the welfare and improvement of mind. Moral independence, on the contrary, is always injurious. The dependence, which is essential, in this respect, to the wholesome temperament of society, includes in it articles, that are, no doubt, unpalatable, to a multitude of the present race of mankind, but that owe their unpopularity only to weakness and vice. It includes a censure to be exercised by every individual over the actions of another, a promptness to enquire into and to judge them. Why should we shrink from this? What could be more beneficial, than for each man to derive assistance for correcting and moulding his conduct, from the perspicacity of his neighbours? The reason that this species of censure is at present exercised with illiberality, is, because it is exercised clandestinely, and because we submit to its operation with impatience and aversion. Moral independence is always injurious: for, as has abundantly appeared in the course of the present enquiry, there is no situation in which I can be placed, where it is not incumbent upon me to adopt a certain conduct in preference to all others, and, of consequence, where I shall not prove an ill member of society, if I act in any other than a particular manner. The attachment that is felt by the present race of mankind to independence in this respect, and the desire to act as they please, without being accountable to the principles of reason, are highly detrimental to the general welfare.

But, if we ought never to act independently of the principles of reason, and, in no instance, to shrink from the candid examination of another, it is nevertheless essential, that we should, at all times, be free, to cultivate the individuality, and follow the dictates, of our own judgement. If there be any thing in the idea of equality that infringes this principle, the objection ought probably to be conclusive. If the scheme be, as it has often been represented, a scheme of government, constraint and regulation, it is, no doubt, in direct hostility with the principles of this work.

But the truth is, that a system of equality requires no restrictions or superintendence. There is no need of common labour, meals or magazines. These are feeble and mistaken instruments, for restraining the conduct, without making conquest of the judgment. If you cannot bring over the hearts of the community to your party, expect no success from brute regulations. If you can, regulation is unnecessary. Such a system was well enough adapted to the military constitution of Sparta; but it is wholly unworthy of men enlisted in no cause but that of reason and justice. Beware of reducing men to the state of machines. Govern them through no medium but that of inclination and conviction.

Can there be a good reason for men's eating together, except where they are prompted to it by the impulse of their own minds? Ought I to come at a certain hour, from the museum where I am working, the retreat in which I meditate, or the observatory where I remark the phenomena of nature, to a certain hall appropriated to the office of eating; instead of eating, as reason bids me, at the time and place most suited to my avocations? Why have common magazines? For the purpose of carrying our provision to a certain distance, that we may afterwards bring them back again? Or is this precaution really necessary, after all that has been said, to guard us against the knavery and covetousness of our associates?

APPENDIX

Of Cooperation, Cohabitation and Marriage

It is a curious subject, to enquire into the due medium between individuality and concert. On the one hand, it is to be observed that human beings are formed for society. Without society, we shall probably be deprived of the most eminent enjoyments of which our nature is susceptible. In society, no man, possessing the genuine marks of a man, can stand alone. Our opinions, our tempers and our habits are modified by those of each other. This is by no means the mere operation of arguments and persuasives; it occurs in that insensible and gradual way, which no resolution can enable us wholly to counteract. He that would attempt to counteract it by insulating himself, will fall into a worse error than that which he seeks to avoid. He will divest himself of the character of a man, and be incapable of judging of his fellow men, or of reasoning upon human affairs.

On the other hand, individuality is of the very essence of intellectual excellence. He that resigns himself wholly to sympathy and imitation, can possess little of mental strength or accuracy. The system of his life is a species

of sensual dereliction. He is like a captive in the garden of Armida; he may revel in the midst of a thousand delights; but he is incapable of the enterprise of a hero, or the severity of a philosopher. He lives forgetting and forgot. He has deserted his station in human society. Mankind cannot be benefited by him. He neither animates them to exertion, nor leads them forward to unexpected improvement. When his country or his species call for him, he is not found in his rank. They can owe him no obligations; and, if one spark of a generous spirit remain within him, he will view his proceedings with no complacency. The truly venerable, and the truly happy, must have the fortitude to maintain his individuality. If he indulge in the gratifications, and cultivate the feelings of man, he must at the same time be strenuous in following the train of his disquisitions, and exercising the powers of his understanding.

The objectors of a former chapter(1*) were partly in the right, when they spoke of the endless variety of the mind. It would be absurd to say that we are not capable of truth, of evidence and agreement. In these respects, so far as mind is in a state of progressive improvement, we are perpetually coming nearer to each other. But there are subjects about which we shall continually differ, and ought to differ. The ideas, associations and circumstances of each man, are properly his own; and it is a pernicious system that would lead us to require all men, however different their circumstances, to act by a precise general rule. Add to this, that, by the doctrine of progressive improvement, we shall always be erroneous, though we shall every day become less erroneous. The proper method for hastening the decline of error, and producing uniformity of judgment, is not, by brute force, by laws, or by imitation; but, on the contrary, by exciting every man to think for himself.

From these principles it appears, that every thing that is usually understood by the term cooperation, is, in some degree, an evil. A man in solitude, is obligated to sacrifice or postpone the execution of his best thoughts, in compliance with his necessities. How many admirable designs have perished in the conception, by means of this circumstance? It is still worse, when a man is also obliged to consult the convenience of others. If I be expected to eat or to work in conjunction with my neighbour, it must either be at a time most convenient to me, or to him, or to neither of us. We cannot be reduced to a clock-work uniformity.

Hence it follows that all supererogatory cooperation is carefully to be avoided, common labour and common meals. "But what shall we say to a cooperation, that seems dictated by the nature of the work to be performed?" It ought to be diminished. There is probably considerably more of injury in the concert of industry, than of sympathies. At present, it is unreasonable to doubt, that the consideration of the evil of cooperation, is, in certain urgent cases, to be postponed to that urgency. Whether, by the nature of things, cooperation of some sort will always be necessary, is a question we are scarcely competent to decide. At present, to pull down a tree, to cut a canal, to navigate a vessel, require the labour of many. Will they always require the labour of many? When we recollect the complicated machines of human contrivance, various sorts of mills, of weaving engines, steam engines, are we not astonished at the compendium of labour they produce? Who shall say where this species of improvement must stop? At present, such inventions alarm the labouring part of the community; and they may be productive of the temporary distress, though they conduce, in the sequel, to the most important interests of the multitude. But, in a state of equal labour, their utility will be liable to no dispute. Hereafter it is by no means clear, that the most extensive operations will not be within the reach of one man; or, to make use of a familiar instance, that a plough may not be turned into a field, and perform its office without the need of superintendence. It was in this sense that the celebrated Franklin conjectured, that "mind would one day become omnipotent over matter."(2*)

The conclusion of the progress which has here been sketched, is something like a final close to the necessity of manual labour. It may be instructive in such cases, to observe, how the sublime geniuses of former times, anticipated what seems likely to be the future improvement of mankind. It was one of the laws of Lycurgus, that no Spartan should be employed in manual labour. For this purpose, under his system, it was necessary, that they should be plentifully supplied with slaves devoted to drudgery. Matter, or, to speak more accurately, the certain and unremitting laws of the universe, will be the Helots of the period we are contemplating. We shall end in this respect, oh immortal legislator! at the point from which you began.

To return to the subject of cooperation. It may be a curious speculation to attend to the progressive steps, by which this feature of human society may be expected to decline. For example: shall we have concerts of music? The miserable state of mechanism of the majority of the performers, is so conspicuous, as to be, even at this day, a topic of mortification and ridicule. Will it not be practicable hereafter for one man to perform the whole? Shall we have theatrical exhibitions? This seems to include an absurd and vicious cooperation. It may be doubted, whether men will hereafter come forward in any mode, formally to repeat words and ideas that are not their own? It may be doubted, whether any musical performer will habitually execute the compositions of others? We yield supinely to the superior merit of our predecessors, because we are accustomed to indulge the inactivity of our faculties. All formal repetition of other men's ideas, seems to be a scheme for

imprisoning, for so long a time, the operations of our own mind. It borders perhaps, in this respect, upon a breach of sincerity, which requires that we should give immediate utterance to every useful and valuable idea that occurs.

Having ventured to state these hints and conjectures, let us endeavour to mark the limits of individuality. Every man that receives an impression from any external object, has the current of his own thoughts modified by force; and yet, without external impressions, we should be nothing. Every man that reads the composition of another, suffers the succession of his ideas to be, in a considerable degree, under the direction of his author. But it does not seem, as if this would ever form a sufficient objection against reading. One man will always have stored up reflections and facts that another wants; and mature and digested discourse will perhaps always, in equal circumstances, be superior to that which is extempore. Conversation is a species of cooperation, one or the other party always yielding to have his ideas guided by the other: yet conversation, and the intercourse of mind with mind, seem to be the most fertile sources of improvement. It is here as it is with punishment. He that, in the gentlest manner, undertakes to reason another out of his vices, will probably occasion pain; but this species of punishment ought, upon no account, to be superseded.

Let not these views of the future individuality of man, be misapprehended, or overtrained. We ought to be able to do without one another. He is the most perfect man, to whom society is not a necessary of life, but a luxury, innocent and enviable, in which he joyfully indulges. Such a man will not fly to society, as to something requisite for the consuming of his time, or the refuge of his weakness. In society he will find pleasure; the temper of this mind will prepare him for friendship and for love. But he will resort with a scarcely inferior eagerness to solitude; and will find in it the highest complacency and the purest delight.

Another article which belongs to the subject of cooperation, is cohabitation. The evils attendant on this practice, are obvious. In order to this human understanding's being successfully cultivated, it is necessary, that the intellectual operations of men should be independent of each other.^(3*) We should avoid such practices as are calculated to melt our opinions into a common mould. Cohabitation is also hostile to that fortitude, which should accustom a man, in his actions, as well as in his opinions, to judge for himself, and feel competent to the discharge of his own duties. Add to this, that it is absurd to expect the inclinations and wishes of two human beings to coincide, through any long period of time. To oblige them to act and to live together, is to subject them to some inevitable portion of thwarting, bickering and unhappiness. This cannot be otherwise, so long as men shall continue to vary in their habits, their preferences and their views. No man is always cheerful and kind; and it is better that his fits of irritation should subside of themselves, since the mischief in that case is more limited, and since the jarring of opposite tempers, and the suggestions of a wounded pride, tend inexpressibly to increase the irritation. When I seek to correct the defects of a stranger, it is with urbanity and good humour. I have no idea of convincing him through the medium of surliness and invective. But something of this kind inevitably obtains, where the intercourse is too unremitted.

The subject of cohabitation is particularly interesting, as it includes in it the subject of marriage. It will therefore be proper to pursue the enquiry in greater detail. The evil of marriage, as it is practiced in European countries, extends further than we have yet described. The method is, for a thoughtless and romantic youth of each sex, to come together, to see each other, for a few times, and under circumstances full of delusion, and then to vow to eternal attachment. What is the consequence of this? In almost every instance they find themselves deceived. They are reduced to make the best of an irretrievable mistake. They are led to conceive it is their wisest policy, to shut their eyes upon realities, happy, if, by any perversion of intellect, they can persuade themselves that they were right in their first crude opinion of each other. Thus the institution of marriage is made a system of fraud; and men who carefully mislead their judgments in the daily affair of their life, must be expected to have a crippled judgment in every other concern.

Add to this, that marriage, as now understood, is a monopoly, and the worst of monopolies. So long as two human beings are forbidden, by positive institution, to follow the dictates of their own mind, prejudice will be alive and vigorous. So long as I seek, by despotic and artificial means, to maintain my possession of a woman, I am guilty of the most odious selfishness. Over this imaginary prize, men watch with perpetual jealousy; and one man finds his desire, and his capacity to circumvent, as much excited, as the other is excited, to traverse his projects, and frustrate his hopes. As long as this state of society continues, philanthropy will be crossed and checked in a thousand ways, and the still augmenting stream of abuse will continue to flow.

The abolition of the present system of marriage, appears to involve no evils. We are apt to represent that abolition to ourselves, as the harbinger of brutal lust and depravity. But it really happens, in this, as in other cases, that the positive laws which are made to restrain our vices, irritate and multiply them. Not to say, that the same sentiments of justice and happiness, which, in a state of equality, would destroy our relish for

expensive gratifications, might be expected to decrease our inordinate appetites of every kind, and to lead us universally to prefer the pleasures of intellect to the pleasures of sense.

It is a question of some moment, whether the intercourse of the sexes, in a reasonable state of society, would be promiscuous, or whether each man would select for himself a partner, to whom he will adhere, as long as that adherence shall continue to be the choice of both parties. Probability seems to be greatly in favour of the latter. Perhaps this side of the alternative is most favourable to population. Perhaps it would suggest itself in preference, to the man who would wish to maintain the several propensities of his frame, in the order due to their relative importance, and to prevent a merely sensual appetite from engrossing excessive attention. It is scarcely to be imagined, that this commerce, in any state of society, will be stripped of its adjuncts, and that men will as willingly hold it, with a woman whose personal and mental qualities they disapprove, as with one of a different description. But it is the nature of the human mind, to persist, for a certain length of time, in its opinion or choice. The parties therefore having acted upon selection, are not likely to forget this selection when the interview is over. Friendship, if by friendship we understand that affection for an individual which is measured singly by what we know of his worth, is one of the most exquisite gratifications, perhaps one of the most improving exercises, of a rational mind. Friendship therefore may be expected to come in aid of the sexual intercourse, to refine its grossness, and increase its delight. All these arguments are calculated to determine our judgement in favour of marriage as a salutary and respectable institution, but not of that species of marriage in which there is no room for repentance and to which liberty and hope are equally strangers.

Admitting these principles therefore as the basis of the sexual commerce, what opinion ought we to form respecting infidelity to this attachment? Certainly no ties ought to be imposed upon either party, preventing them from quitting the attachment, whenever their judgement directs them to quit it. With respect to such infidelities as are compatible with an intention to adhere to it, the point of principal importance is a determination to have recourse to no species of disguise. In ordinary cases, and where the periods of absence are of no long duration, it would seem that any inconstancy would reflect some portion of discredit on the person that practised it. It would argue that the person's propensities were not under that kind of subordination which virtue and self-government appear to prescribe. But inconstancy like any other temporary dereliction, would not be found incompatible with a character of uncommon excellence. What, at present, renders it, in many instances, peculiarly loathsome is its being practised in a clandestine manner. It leads to a train of falsehood and a concerted hypocrisy, than which there is scarcely anything that more eminently depraves and degrades the human mind.

The mutual kindness of persons of an opposite sex will, in such a state, fall under the same system as any other species of friendship. Exclusively of groundless and obstinate attachments, it will be impossible for me to live in the world, without finding in one man a worth superior to that of another. To this man I shall feel kindness, in exact proportion to my apprehension of his worth. The case will be the same with respect to the other sex. I shall assiduously cultivate the intercourse of that woman, whose moral and intellectual accomplishments strike me in the most powerful manner. But "it may happen that other men will feel for her the same preference that I do." This will create no difficulty. We may all enjoy her conversation; her choice being declared, we shall all be wise enough to consider the sexual commerce as unessential to our regard. It is a mark of the extreme depravity of our present habits, that we are inclined to suppose the sexual commerce necessary to the advantages arising from the purest friendship. It is by no means indispensable, that the female to whom each man attaches himself in that matter, should appear to each the most deserving and excellent of her sex.

Let us consider the way in which this state of society will modify education. It "may be imagined, that the abolition of the present system of marriage would make education, in a certain-sense, the affair of the public; though, if there be any truth in the reasonings of this work, to provide for it by the positive institutions of a community, would be extremely inconsistent with the true principle of an intellectual nature.(4*) Education may be regarded as consisting of various branches. First, the personal cares which the helpless state of an infant requires. These will probably devolve upon the mother; unless, by frequent parturition, or by the nature of these cares, that be found to render her share of the burden unequal; and then it will be amicably and willingly participated by others. Secondly, food and other necessary supplies. These will easily find their true level, and spontaneously flow, from the quarter in which they abound, to the quarter which is deficient. Lastly, the term education may be used to signify instruction. The task of instruction, under such a form of society, will be greatly simplified and altered from what it is at present. It will then scarcely be thought more necessary to make boys slaves, than to make men so. The business will not then be to bring forward so many adepts in the eggshell, that the vanity of parents may be flattered by hearing their praises. No man will think of vexing with premature learning the feeble and inexperienced, left, when they came to years of discretion, they should refuse to be learned. The mind will be suffered to expand itself, in proportion as occasion and impression shall excite it, and not tortured and enervated by being cast in a particular mould. No creature in human form will

be expected to learn any thing, but because he desires it, and has some conception of its value; and every man, in proportion to his capacity, will be ready to furnish such general hints and comprehensive views, as will suffice for the guidance and encouragement of him who studies from the impulse of desire.

These observations lead us to the consideration of one additional difficulty, which relates to the division of labour. Shall each man manufacture his tools, furniture and accommodations? This would perhaps be a tedious operation. Each man performs the task to which he is accustomed, more skillfully, and in a shorter time than another. It is reasonable that you should make for me, that which perhaps I should be three or four times as long in making, and should make imperfectly at last. Shall we then introduce barter and exchange? By no means. The moment I require any further reason for supplying you, than the cogency of your claim, the moment, in addition to the dictates of benevolence, I demand a prospect of reciprocal advantage to myself, there is an end of that political justice and pure society of which we treat.

The division of labour, as it has been developed by commercial writers, is the offspring of avarice. It has been found that ten persons can make two hundred and forty times as many pins in one day as one person.^(5*) This refinement is the growth of monopoly. The object is, to see how vast a surface the industry of the lower classes may be beaten, the more completely to gild over the indolent and the proud. The ingenuity of the merchant is whetted, by new improvements of this sort to transport more of the wealth of the powerful into his coffers. The practicability of effecting a compendium of labour by this means, will be greatly diminished, when men shall learn to deny themselves partial superfluities. The utility of such a saving of labour, where labour shall be changed from a burthen into an amusement, will scarcely balance the evils of so extensive a cooperation. From what has been said it appears, that there will be a division of labour, if we compare the society in question with the state of the solitaire and the savage. But it will produce an extensive simplification of labour, if we compare it with that to which we are at present accustomed in civilised Europe.

NOTES:

1. Book VIII, Chap. V.
2. I have no authority to quote for this expression but the conversation of Doctor Price. I am happy to find upon enquiry, that Mr. William Morgan, the nephew of Dr Price, and editor of his works, distinctly recollects to have heard it from his uncle.
3. Book IV, Chap. III.
4. Book VI, Chap. VIII.
5. Smith's Wealth of Nations, Book I, Chap. I.



Of Property

William Godwin

[1793 / Chapter 9, and an Appendix / Part 6 of 7]

CHAPTER IX

Objection to this System from the Principle of Population

An author who has speculated widely upon subjects of government(1*) has recommended equality, (or, which was rather his idea, a community of goods to be maintained by the vigilance of the state), as a complete remedy, for the usurpation and distress which are, at present, the most powerful enemies of human kind; for the vices which infect education in some instances, and the neglect it encounters in more; for all the turbulence of passion, and all the injustice of selfishness. But, after having exhibited this brilliant picture, he finds an argument that demolishes the whole, and restores him to indifference or despair, in "the excessive population that would ensue."

The question of population, as it relates to the science of politics and society, is considerably curious. Several writers upon these topics have treated it in a way calculated to produce a very gloomy impression, and have placed precautions to counteract the multiplication of the human species, among the most important objects of civil prudence. These precautions appear to have occupied much attention in several ancient nations, among whom there prevailed a great solicitude, that the number of citizens in the state should suffer no augmentations. In modern times a contrary opinion has frequently obtained, and the populousness of a country has been said to constitute its true wealth and prosperity.

Perhaps however express precautions in either kind, are superfluous and nugatory. There is a principle in the nature of human society, by means of which everything seems to tend to its level, and to proceed in the most auspicious way, when least interfered with by the mode of regulation. In a certain stage of the social progress population seems rapidly to increase; this seems to be the case in the United States of America. In a subsequent stage, it undergoes little change, either in the way of increase or diminution; this is the case in the more civilized countries of Europe. The number of inhabitants in a country will perhaps never be found, in the ordinary course of affairs, greatly to increase, beyond the facility of subsistence.

Nothing is more easy than to account for this circumstance. So long as there is a facility of subsistence, men will be encouraged to early marriages, and to a careful rearing of their children. In America, it is said, men congratulate themselves upon the increase of their families as upon a new accession of wealth. The labour of their children, even in the early stage, soon redeems and even repays with interest, the expense and effort of rearing them. In such countries the wages of the labourer are high, for the number of labourers bear no proportion to the general spirit of enterprise. In many European countries, on the other hand, a large family has become a proverbial expression for an uncommon degree of poverty and wretchedness. The price of labour in any state, so long as the spirit of accumulation shall prevail, is an infallible barometer of the state of its population. It is impossible where the price of labour is greatly reduced, and an added population threatens a still further reduction, that men should not be considerably under the influence of fear, respecting an early marriage, and a numerous family.

There are various methods by the practice of which population may be checked; by the exposing of children, as among the ancients, and, at this day, in China; by the art of procuring abortion, as it is said to subsist in the

island of Ceylon; by a promiscuous intercourse of the sexes, which is found extremely hostile to the multiplication of the species; or, lastly, by a systematical abstinence, such as must be supposed, in some degree, to prevail in monasteries of either sex. But, without any express institution of this kind, the encouragement or discouragement that arises from the general state of a community, will probably be found to be all-powerful in its operation.

Supposing however that population were not thus adapted to find its own level, it is obvious to remark upon the objection of this chapter, that to reason thus, is to foresee difficulties at a great distance. Three fourths of the habitable globe, are now uncultivated. The improvements to be made in cultivation, and the augmentations the earth is capable of receiving in the article of productiveness, cannot, as yet, be reduced to any limits of calculation. Myriads of centuries of still increasing population may pass away, and the earth be yet found sufficient for the support of its inhabitants. It were idle therefore to conceive discouragement from so distant a contingency. The rational anticipation of human improvement are unlimited, not eternal. The very globe that we inhabit, and the solar system, may, for anything that we know, be subject to decay. Physical casualties of different denominations, may interfere with the progressive nature of intellect. But, putting these out of the question, it is certainly most reasonable, to commit so remote a danger to the chance of such remedies, (remedies, of which perhaps we may, at this time, not have the smallest idea) as shall suggest themselves at a period sufficiently early for their practical application.

NOTES:

1. Wallace: *Various Prospects of Mankind, Nature, and Providence*, 1761.

APPENDIX

Of Health, and the Prolongation of Human Life

The question respecting population is, in some degree, connected, with the subject of health and longevity. It may therefore be allowed us, to make use of this occasion, for indulging in certain speculations upon this article. What follows, must be considered, as eminently a deviation into the land of conjecture. If it be false, it leaves the system to which it is appended, in all sound reason, as impregnable as ever.

Let us then, in this place, return to the sublime conjecture of Franklin, a man habitually conversant with the system of the external universe, and by no means propense to extravagant speculations, that "mind will one day become omnipotent over matter."(1*) The sense which he annexed to this expression, seems to have related to the improvements of human invention, in relation to machines and the compendium of labour. But, if the power of intellect can be established over all other matter, are we not inevitably led to ask, why not over the matter of our own bodies? If over matter at however great a distance, why not over matter which, ignorant as we may be of the tie that connects it with the thinking principle, we seem always to carry about with us, and which is our medium of communication with the external universe?

The different cases in which thought modifies the structure and members of the human body, are obvious to all. First, they are modified by our voluntary thoughts or design. We desire to stretch out our hand, and it is stretched out. We perform a thousand operations of the same species every day, and their familiarity annihilates the wonder. They are not in themselves less wonderful, than any of those modifications we are least accustomed to conceive. Secondly, mind modifies body involuntarily. To omit, for the present, what has been offered upon this subject by way of hypothesis and inference,(2*) there are many instances in which this fact presents itself in the most unequivocal manner. Has not a sudden piece of good news been frequently found to dissipate a corporal indisposition? Is it not still more usual for mental impressions to produce indisposition, and even what is called a broken heart? And shall we believe that that which is so powerful in mischief, can be altogether impotent for happiness? How common is the remark, that those accidents, which are to the indolent a source of disease, are forgotten and extirpated in the busy and active? I walk twenty miles in an indolent and half determined temper, and am extremely fatigued. I walk twenty miles, full of ardour, and with a motive that engrosses my soul, and I arrive as fresh and alert as when I began my journey. Emotion, excited by some unexpected word, by a letter that is delivered to us, occasions the most extraordinary revolutions in our frame, accelerates the circulation, causes the heart to palpitate, the tongue to

refuse its office, and has been known to occasion death by extreme anguish or extreme joy. There is nothing of which the physician is more frequently aware, than of the power of the mind in assisting or retarding convalescence.

Why is it that a mature man loses that elasticity of limb, which characterises the heedless gaiety of youth? The origin of this appears to be, that he desists from youthful habits. He assumes an air of dignity, incompatible with the lightness of childish sallies. He is visited and vexed with the cares that rise out of our mistaken institutions, and his heart is no longer satisfied and gay. His limbs become stiff, unwieldy and awkward. This is the forerunner of old age and of death.

A habit peculiarly favourable to corporeal vigour, is cheerfulness. Every time that our mind becomes morbid, vacant and melancholy, our external frame falls into disorder. Listlessness of thought is the brother of death. But cheerfulness gives new elasticity to our limbs, and circulation to our juices. Nothing can long be stagnant in the frame of him, whose heart is tranquil, and his imagination active.

A further requisite in the case of which we treat, is clear and distinct apprehension. Disease seems perhaps in all instances to be the concomitant of confusion. When reason resigns the helm, and our ideas fluctuate without order or direction, we sleep. Delirium and insanity are of the same nature. Fainting appears principally to consist in a relaxation of intellect, so that the ideas seem to mix in painful disorder, and nothing is distinguished. He that continues to act, or is led to a renewal of action with perspicuity and decision, is almost inevitably a man in health.

The surest source of cheerfulness is benevolence. To a youthful mind, while every thing strikes with its novelty, the individual situation must be peculiarly unfortunate, if gaiety of thought be not produced, or, when interrupted, do not speedily return with its healing virtue. But novelty is a fading charm, and perpetually decreases. Hence the approach of inanity and listlessness. After we have made a certain round, life delights no more. A deathlike apathy invades us. Thus the aged are generally cold and indifferent; nothing interests their attention, or rouses their sluggishness. How should it be otherwise? The objects of human pursuit are commonly frigid and contemptible, and the mistake comes at last to be detected. But virtue is a charm that never fades. The mind that overflows with kindness and sympathy, will always be cheerful. The man who is perpetually busied in contemplations of public good, can scarcely be inactive. Add to this, that a benevolent temper is peculiarly irreconcilable with those sentiments of anxiety, discontent, rage, revenge and despair, which so powerfully corrode the frame, and hourly consign their miserable victims to an untimely grave.

Thus far we have discoursed of a negative power which, if sufficiently exercised, would, it is to be presumed, eminently tend to the prolongation of human life. But there is a power of another description, which seems entitled to our attention in this respect. We have frequently had occasion to point out the distinction between our voluntary and involuntary motions.(3*) We have seen that they are continually running into each other; our involuntary motions gradually becoming subject to the power of volition, and our voluntary motions degenerating into involuntary. We concluded in an early part of this work,(4*) and that, as it should seem, with sufficient reason, that the true perfection of man was to attain, as nearly as possible, to the perfectly voluntary state; that we ought to be, upon all occasions, prepared to render a reason of our actions; and should remove ourselves to the furthest distance, from the state of mere inanimate machines, acted upon by causes of which they have no understanding.

Our involuntary motions are frequently found gradually to become subject to the power of volition. It seems impossible to set limits to this species of metamorphosis. Its reality cannot be questioned, when we consider that every motion of the human frame was originally involuntary.(5*) Is it not then highly probable, in the process of human improvement, that we may finally obtain an empire over every articulation of our frame? The circulation of the blood is a motion, in our present state, eminently involuntary. Yet nothing is more obvious than that certain thoughts, and states of the thinking faculty, are calculated to affect this process. Reasons have been adduced which seem to lead to an opinion, that thought and animal motion are, in all cases, to be considered as antecedent and consequent.(6*) We can now perhaps by an effort of the mind correct certain commencing irregularities of the system, and forbid, in circumstances where those phenomena would otherwise appear, the heart to palpitate, and the limbs to tremble. The voluntary power of some men over their animal frame, is found to extend to various articles, in which other men are impotent.

A further probability will be reflected upon these conjectures, if we recollect the picture which was formerly exhibited,(7*) of the rapidity of the succession of ideas. If we can have a series of three hundred and twenty ideas in a second of time, why should it be supposed that we may not hereafter arrive at the skill of carrying number of contemporaneous processes without disorder?

Nothing can be more irreconcilable to analogy, than to conclude, because a certain species of power is beyond the train of our present observations, that it is beyond the limits of the human mind.^(8*) We talk familiarly indeed of the extent of our faculties; and our vanity prompts us to suppose that we have reached the goal of human capacity. But there is little plausibility in so arrogant an assumption. If it could have been told to the savage inhabitants of Europe in the times of Theseus and Achilles that man was capable of predicting eclipses and weighing the air, of reducing to settled rules the phenomena of nature so that no prodigies should remain, and of measuring the distance and size of the heavenly bodies, this would not have appeared to them less incredible than if we had told them of the possibility of maintaining the human body in perpetual youth and vigour. But we have not only this analogy, showing that the discovery in question forms, as it were, a regular branch of the acquisitions that belong to an intellectual nature; but, in addition to this, we seem to have a glimpse of the manner in which the acquisition will be secured.

One remark may be proper in this place. If the remedies here proposed tend to a total extirpation of the infirmities of our nature, then, though we should not be able to promise them an early or complete success, we may probably find them of some utility. They may contribute to prolong our vigour, if not to immortalize it, and, which is of more consequence, to make us live while we live. Every time the mind is invaded with anguish and gloom, the frame becomes disordered. Every time languor and indifference creep upon us, our functions fall into decay. In proportion as we cultivate fortitude and equanimity, our circulations will be cheerful. In proportion as we cultivate a kind and benevolent propensity, we may be secure of finding something to interest and engage us.

Medicine may reasonably be stated to consist of two branches, animal and intellectual. The latter of these has been infinitely too much neglected. It cannot be employed to the purposes of a profession; or, where it has been incidentally so employed, it has been artificially and indirectly, not in an open and avowed manner. "Herein the patient must minister to himself."^(9*) It would no doubt be of extreme moment to us to be thoroughly acquainted with the power of motives, perseverance, and what is called resolution, in this respect.

The sum of the arguments which have been here offered, amounts to a species of presumption, that the term of human life may be prolonged, and that by the immediate operation of intellect, beyond any limits which we are able to assign. It would be idle to talk of the absolute immortality of man. Eternity and immortality are phrases to which it is impossible for us to annex any distinct ideas, and the more we attempt to explain them, the more we shall find ourselves involved in contradiction.

To apply these remarks to the subject of population. One tendency of a cultivated and virtuous mind is to diminish our eagerness for the gratifications of the senses. They please at present by their novelty, that is, because we know not how to estimate them. They decay in the decline of life, indirectly because the system refuses them, but directly and principally because they no longer excite the ardour of the mind. The gratifications of sense please at present by their imposture. We soon learn to despise the mere animal function, which, apart from the delusions of intellect, would be nearly the same in all cases; and to value it only as it happens to be relieved by personal charms or mental excellence.

The men therefore whom we are supposing to exist, when the earth shall refuse itself to a more extended population, will probably cease to propagate. The whole will be a people of men, and not of children. Generation will not succeed generation, nor truth have, in a certain degree, to recommence her career every thirty years. Other improvements may be expected to keep pace with those of health and longevity. There will be no war, no crimes, no administration of justice, as it is called, and no government. Beside this, there will be neither disease, anguish, melancholy, nor resentment. Every man will seek, with ineffable ardour, the good of all. Mind will be active and eager, yet never disappointed. Men will see the progressive advancement of virtue and good, and feel that, if things occasionally happen contrary to their hopes, the miscarriage itself was a necessary part of that progress. They will know that they are members of the chain, that each has his several utility, and they will not feel indifferent to that utility. They will be eager to enquire into the good that already exists, the means by which it was produced, and the greater good that is yet in store. They will never want motives for exertion; for that benefit which a man thoroughly understands and earnestly loves, he cannot refrain from endeavouring to promote.

Before we dismiss this subject it is proper once again to remind the reader, that the substance of this appendix is given only as matter of probable conjecture, and that the leading argument of this division of the work is altogether independent of its truth or falsehood.

NOTES:

1. Book VIII, Chap. VIII, Appendix. The authors who have published their conjectures respecting the possibility of

extending the term of human life are many. The most illustrious of these is probably lord Bacon; the most recent is Condorcet, in his Outlines of a History of the Progress of the Human Mind, published the first appearance of this work. These authors however are inclined to rest their hopes rather upon the growing perfection of art, than, as it is here done, upon the immediate and operation of an improved intellect.

2. Book IV, Chap. IX
3. Book I, Chap. V; Book IV, Chap. VII, X.
4. Book IV, Chap. IX.
5. Book IV, Chap. IX.
6. Book IV, Chap. IX.
7. Book I, Chap. VIII.
8. Book I, Chap. V, §2.
9. Shakespeare: Macbeth, Act V.

[Page 1](#) * [Page 2](#) * [Page 3](#) * [Page 4](#) * [Page 5](#) * [Page 6](#) * [Page 7](#)



Of Property

William Godwin

[1793 / Chapter 10 / Part 7 of 7]

REFLECTIONS

We have now taken a general survey of the system of equality, and there remains only to state a few incidental remarks with which it may be proper to wind up the subject.

No idea has excited greater horror in the minds of a multitude of persons, than that of the mischiefs that will ensue from the dissemination of what they call levelling principles. They believe "that these principles will inevitably ferment in the minds of the vulgar, and that the attempt to carry them into execution will be art with every species of calamity." They represent to themselves "the uninformed and uncivilized part of mankind, as let loose from restraint, and hurried into every kind of excess. Knowledge and taste, the improvements of intellect, the discoveries of sages, the beauties of poetry and art, are trampled under foot and extinguished by barbarians. It is another inundation of Goths and Vandals, with this bitter aggravation, that the viper stings us to death, was fostered in our own bosom." They conceive the scene as beginning in massacre. They suppose "all that is great, preeminent and illustrious as ranking among the first victims. Such as are distinguished by peculiar refinement of manners, or energy of understanding and virtue, will be the inevitable objects of envy and jealousy. Such as intrepidly exert themselves to succour the persecuted, or to declare to the public what they are least inclined, but is most necessary for them, to hear, will be marked out for assassination."

Whatever may be the abstract recommendations of the system of equality, we must not allow ourselves any such partiality upon a subject in which the welfare of the species is involved, as should induce us to shrink from a due attention to the ideas here exhibited. Massacre is the too possible attendant upon revolution, and massacre is perhaps the most hateful scene, allowing for its momentary duration, that any imagination can suggest. The fearful, hopeless expectation of the defeated, and the bloodhound fury of their conquerors, is a complication of mischief that all which has been told of infernal regions can scarcely surpass. The cold blooded massacres that are perpetrated under the name of criminal justice, fall short of these in some of their most frightful aggravations. The ministers and instruments of law, have by custom reconciled their minds to the dreadful task they perform, and often bear their parts in the most shocking enormities without being sensible to the passions allied to these enormities. They do not always accompany their murders with the rudeness of an insulting triumph; and, as they conduct themselves, in a certain sort, by known principles of injustice, the evil we have reason to apprehend, has its limits. But the instruments of massacre are discharged from every restraint. Whatever their caprice dictates, their hands are instantly employed to perpetrate. Their eyes emit flashes of cruelty and rage. They pursue their victims from street to street and from house to house. They tear them from the arms of their fathers and their wives. They glut themselves with barbarity, and utter shouts of horrid joy at the spectacle of tortures.

In answer to this representation it has sometimes been alleged by the friends of reform, "that the advantages possessed by a system of liberty are so great, as to be worth purchasing at any price; that the evils of the most sanguinary revolution are temporary; that the vices of despotism, which few pens indeed have ventured to record in all their demerits, are scarcely less atrocious in the hour of their commission, and infinitely more terrible by their extent and duration; and finally, that the crimes perpetrated in a revolutionary movement, can in no just estimate be imputed to the innovators; that they were engendered by the preceding oppression, and ought to be regarded as the last struggles of expiring tyranny."

But, not to repeat arguments that have already been fully exhibited,(1*) it must be recollected, that "the

benefits which innovation may seem to promise are not to be regarded as certain. After all, it may not be utterly impossible, that the nature of man will always remain, for the most part, unaltered, and that he will be found incapable of that degree of knowledge and constancy, which seems essential to a liberal democracy or a pure equality. However cogent may be the arguments for the practicability of human improvement, is it then justifiable, upon the mere credit of predictions, to expose mankind to the greatest calamities? Who that has a just conception of the nature of human understanding will vindicate such a proceeding? A careful enquirer is always detecting his past errors; each year of his life produces a severe comment upon the opinions of the last; he suspects all his judgements, and is certain of none. We wander in the midst of appearances; and plausible appearances are to be found on all sides. The wisest men perhaps have generally proved the most confirmed sceptics. Speculations therefore upon the new modes in which human affairs may be combined, different from any that occur in the history of past ages, may seem fitter to amuse men of acuteness and leisure, than to be depended on in deciding the dearest interests of mankind. Proceedings, the effects of which have been verified by experience, furnish a surer ground of dependence, than the most laboured reason can afford us in regard to schemes as yet untried."

Undoubtedly in the views here detailed there is considerable force; and it would be well if persons, who are eager to effect abrupt changes in human society, would give them an attentive consideration. They do not however sufficiently apply to the question proposed to be examined. Our enquiry was not respecting revolution, but disquisition. We are not concerned to vindicate any species of violence; we do not assume that levelling principles are to be acted upon through the medium of force; we have simply affirmed that he who is persuaded of their truth, ought to endeavour to render them a subject of attention. To be convinced of this we have only to consider the enormous and unquestionable political evils that are daily before our eyes, and the probability there is that, by temperate investigation, these evils may be undermined, with little or no tumultuary concussion.(2*) In every affair of human life we are obliged to act upon a simple probability; and therefore, while it is highly worthy of a conscientious philanthropist to recollect the universal uncertainty of opinion, he is bound not to abstain from acting, with caution and sobriety, upon the judgements of his understanding, from a fear left, at the time that he intends to produce benefit, he should unintentionally be the occasion of evil.

But there is another consideration worthy of serious attention in this place. Granting, for a moment, the utmost weight to the objections of those who remind us of the mischief of political experiments, it is proper to ask, Can we suppress discussion? Can we arrest the progress of the enquiring mind? If we can, it must be by the most unmitigated despotism. Intellect has a perpetual tendency to proceed. It cannot be held back, but by a power that counteracts its genuine tendency, through every moment of its existence. Tyrannical and sanguinary must be the measures employed for this purpose. Miserable and disgusting must be the scene they produce. Their result will be barbarism, ignorance, superstition, servility, hypocrisy. This is the alternative, so far as there is any alternative in their choice, to which those who are impowered to consult for the general welfare must inevitably resort, if the suppression of enquiry be the genuine dictate of public interest.

Such has been, for the most part, the policy of governments through every age of the world. Have we slaves? We assiduously retain them in ignorance. Have we colonies and dependencies? The great effort of our care is to keep them from being populous and prosperous. Have we subjects? It is "by impotence and misery that we endeavour to render them supple: plenty is fit only to make them unmanageable, disobedient and mutinous."(3*) If this were the true philosophy of social institutions, well might we shrink from it with horror. How tremendous an abortion would the human species be, if all that tended to invigorate their understandings, tended to make them unprincipled and profligate!

In the meantime it ought not to be forgotten, that to say that a knowledge of political truth can be injurious to the true interests of mankind, is to affirm and express contradiction. Political truth is that science which teaches us to weigh in the balance of an accurate judgement, the different proceedings that may be adopted, for the purpose of giving welfare and prosperity to communities of men. The only way in which discussion can be a reasonable object of terror, is by its power of giving to falsehood, under certain circumstances, the speciousness of truth, or by that partial propagation, the tendency of which is to intoxicate and mislead those understandings that, by an adequate instruction, would have been sobered and enlightened.

These considerations will scarcely permit us to doubt, that it is the duty of governments to maintain the most inflexible neutrality, and of individuals to publish the truths with which they appear to be acquainted. The more truth is discovered, the more it is known in its true dimensions, and not in its parts, the less is it possible that it should coalesce with, or leave room for the effects of, error. The true philanthropist, instead of suppressing discussion, will be eager to take a share in the scene, to exert the full strength of his faculties in investigation, and to contribute by his exertions to render the operation of enquiry at once perspicuous and profound.

The condition of the human species at the present hour is critical and alarming. We are not without grounds of

reasonable hope that the issue will be uncommonly beneficial. There is however much to apprehend, from the narrow views, and angry passions, of the contending parties. Every interval that can be gained, provided it is not an interval of torpor and indifference, is perhaps to be considered in the light of an advantage.

Meanwhile, in proportion as the just apprehensions of explosion shall increase, there are high duties incumbent upon every branch of the community.

First, upon those who are fitted to be precursor to their fellows in the discovery of truth.

They are bound to be active, indefatigable and disinterested. It is incumbent upon them to abstain from inflammatory language, and expressions of acrimony and resentment. It is absurd in any government to erect itself into a court of criticism in this respect, and to establish a criterion of liberality and decorum;(4*) but, for that very reason, it is doubly incumbent on those who communicate their thoughts to the public, to exercise a rigid censure over themselves. The lessons of liberty and equality are lessons of good will to all orders of men. They free the peasant from the iniquity that depresses his mind, and the privileged from the luxury and despotism by which he is corrupted. It is disgraceful to those who teach these lessons, if they stain their benignity, by showing that that benignity has not become the inmate of their hearts.

Nor is it less necessary that they should express themselves with explicitness and sincerity. No maxim can be more suspicious than that which teaches us to consult the temper of the times, and tell only as much as we imagine our contemporaries will be able to bear.(5*) This practice is at present almost universal, and it will perhaps not be difficult to observe its pernicious effects. We retail and mangle truth. We impart it to our fellows, not with the liberal measure with which we have received it, but with such parsimony as our own miserable prudence may chance to prescribe. That we may deceive others with a tranquil conscience, we begin with deceiving ourselves. We put shackles upon our minds, and dare not trust ourselves at large in the pursuit of truth. This practice seems to have been greatly promoted by the machinations of party, and the desire of one wise and adventurous leader to lead a troop of weak, timid and selfish adherents in his train. There can scarcely be a sufficient reason why I should not declare in any assembly upon the face of the earth "that I am a republican." There is no more reason to apprehend that, being a republican under a monarchical government, I shall enter into a desperate faction to invade the public tranquillity, than if I were monarchical under a republic. Every community of men, as well as every individual, must govern itself according to its ideas of justice.(6*) What I should desire is, not by violence to change its institutions, but by discussion to change its ideas. I have no concern, if I would study merely the public good, with factions or intrigue; but simply to promulgate the truth, and to wait the tranquil progress of conviction. If there be any assembly that cannot bear this, of such an assembly I ought to be no member. It probably happens, much oftener than we are willing to imagine, that "the post of honour," or, which is better, the post of utility, "is a private station."(7*)

The dissimulation here censured, beside its ill effects upon him who practises it, and, by degrading and unnerving his character, upon society at large, has a particular ill consequence with respect to the point we are considering. It lays a mine, and prepares an explosion. This is the tendency of all unnatural restraint. The unfettered progress of investigation is perhaps always salutary. Its advances are gradual, and each step prepares the general mind for that which is to follow. They are sudden and unprepared, and therefore necessarily partial, emanations of truth that have the greatest tendency to deprive men of their sobriety and self-command. Reserve in this respect is calculated, at once, to give a rugged and angry tone to the multitude, whenever they shall happen to discover what is thus concealed, and to mislead the depositaries of political power. It soothes them into false security, and prompts them to maintain an inauspicious obstinacy.

Having considered what it is that belongs in such a crisis to the enlightened and wise, let us next turn our attention to a very different class of society, the rich and great. And here, in the first place, it may be remarked that it is a false calculation that leads us universally to despair of having these for the advocates of political justice. Mankind are not so miserably selfish, as satirists and courtiers have supposed. We perhaps never engage in any action of moment without having enquired what is the decision of justice respecting it. We are at all times anxious to satisfy ourselves that what our inclinations lead us to do, is innocent and right to be done.(8*) Since therefore justice occupies so large a share in the contemplations of the human mind, it cannot reasonably be doubted that a strong and commanding view of justice, would prove a powerful motive to influence the choice of that description of men we are now considering. But that virtue which, for whatever reason, we have chosen, soon becomes recommended to us by a thousand other reasons. We find in it reputation, honour, and self-complacence, in addition to the recommendations it derives from impartial justice.

The rich and great are far from callous to views of general felicity, when such views are brought before them with that evidence and attraction of which they are susceptible. From one dreadful disadvantage their minds are free. They have not been soured with unrelenting tyranny, or narrowed by the perpetual pressure of

distress. They are peculiarly qualified to judge of the emptiness of that pomp and those gratification, which are always most admired, when they are seen from a distance. They will frequently be found considerably indifferent to these things, unless confirmed by habit and rendered inveterate by age. If you show them the attractions of gallantry and magnanimity in resigning them, they will often be resigned without reluctance. Wherever accident of any sort has introduced an active mind, there enterprise is a necessary consequence; and there are few persons so inactive, as to sit down for ever in the supine enjoyment of the indulgences to which they were born. The same spirit that has led forth the young nobility of successive ages to encounter the hardships of a camp, might render them the champions of the cause of equality: nor is it to be believed that the consideration of superior virtue in this latter exertion, will be without its effect.

But let us suppose a considerable party of the rich and great to be actuated by no view but to their emolument and ease. It is not difficult to show them that their interest in this sense will admit of no more than a temperate and yielding resistance. To such we may say: "It is in vain for you to fight against truth. It is like endeavouring with the human hand to stop the inroad of the ocean. Be wise betimes. Seek your safety in concession. If you will not come over to the standard of political justice, temporize at least with an enemy whom you cannot overcome. Much, inexpressibly much depends upon you. If your proceedings be moderate and judicious, it is not probable that you will suffer the privation, even of that injurious indulgence and accommodation to which you are so strongly attached. The genuine progress of political improvement is kind and attentive to the sentiments of all. It changes the opinions of men by insensible degrees; produces nothing by shock and abruptness; and is far from requiring the calamity of any. Confiscation, and the proscription of bodies of men, form no branch of its story. These evils, which by wise and sober men will always be regretted, will in all probability never occur, unless brought on by your indiscretion and obstinacy. Even in the very tempest and fury of explosion, if such an event shall arise, it may perhaps still be in your power to make advantageous conditions, and to be little or nothing sufferers by the change.

"Above all, do not be lulled into a rash and headlong security. Do not imagine that innovation is not at hand; or that the spirit of innovation can be defeated. We have already seen^(9*) how much the hypocrisy and instability of the wise and enlightened of the present day, those who confess much, and have a confused view of still more, but dare not examine the whole with a steady and unshrinking eye, are calculated to increase this security. But there is a danger still more palpable. Do not be misled by the unthinking and seemingly general cry of those who have no fixed principles. Addresses have been found in every age a very uncertain criterion of the future conduct of a people. Do not count upon the numerous train of your adherents, retainers and servants. They afford a feeble dependence. They are men, and cannot be unconcerned as to the interests and claims of mankind. Some them will adhere to you, as long as a sordid interest seems to draw them in that direction. But the moment yours shall appear to be the losing cause, the same interest will carry them over to the enemy's standard. They will disappear like the morning's mist.

"Can it be supposed that you are incapable of receiving impression from another argument? Will you feel no compunction at the thought of resisting the greatest of all benefits? Are you content to be regarded by your impartial contemporaries, and to be recollected, as long as your memory shall endure, as the obstinate adversaries of philanthropy and justice? Can you reconcile it to your own minds that, for a sordid interest, for the cause of general corruption and abuse, you should be found active in stifling truth, and strangling the newborn happiness of mankind?" Would it were possible to take this argument felt by the enlightened and accomplished advocates of aristocracy! that they could be persuaded to consult neither passion, nor prejudice, nor the reveries of imagination, in deciding so momentous a question! "We know," I would say, "that truth will be triumphant, even though you refuse to be her ally. We do not fear your enmity. But our hearts bleed to see such gallantry, talents and virtue employed by the calamities of mankind. We recollect with grief that, when the lustre of your merits shall fill distant generations with astonishment, they will not be less astonished that you could be made the dupes of prejudice, and deliberately surrender the larger portion of the good you might have achieved, and the unqualified affection that might have pursued your memory."^(10*) To the general mass of the adherents of equality, it may be proper to address a few words. "If there be any force in the arguments of this work, we seem authorized to deduce thus much from them, that truth is irresistible. Let then this axiom be the rudder of our undertakings. Let us not precipitately endeavour to accomplish that to-day which the dissemination of truth will make unavoidable to-morrow. Let us not over-anxiously watch for occasions and events: of particular events the ascendancy of truth is independent. Let us anxiously refrain from violence: force is not a conviction, and is extremely unworthy of the cause of justice. Let us admit into our bosoms neither contempt, animosity, resentment nor revenge. The cause of justice is the cause of humanity. Its advocates should be penetrated with universal good-will. We should love this cause; for it conduces to the general happiness of mankind. We should love it; for there is not a man that lives, who, in the natural and tranquil progress of things, will not be made happier by its approach. The most powerful circumstance by which it has been retarded, is the mistake of its adherents, the air of ruggedness, brutishness

and inflexibility which they have given to that which, in itself, is all benignity. Nothing less than this could have prevented the great masses of enquirers from bestowing upon it a patient examination. Be it the care of the now increasing advocates of equality, to remove this obstacle to the success of their cause. We have but two plain duties, which, if we set out right, it is not easy to mistake. The first is an unwearied attention to the great instrument of justice, reason. We should communicate our sentiments with the utmost frankness. We should endeavour to press them upon the attention of others. In this we should give way to no discouragement. We should sharpen our intellectual weapons; add to the stock of our knowledge; be pervaded with a sense of the magnitude of our cause; and perpetually add to that calm presence of mind and self-possession which must enable us to do justice to our principles. Our second duty is tranquillity."

It will not be right to pass over a question that will inevitably suggest itself to the mind of the reader. "If an equalization of conditions be to take place, not by law, regulation or public institution, but only through the private conviction of individuals, in what manner shall it begin?" In answering this question it is not necessary to prove so simple a proposition, as that all republicanism, all reduction of ranks and immunities, strongly tends towards an equalization of conditions. If men go on to improve in discernment, and this they will with peculiar rapidity, when the ill-constructed governments which now retard their progress are removed, the same arguments which showed them the injustice of ranks, will show them the injustice of one man's wanting that which, while it is in the possession of another, conduces in no respect to his well being.

It is a common error to imagine "that this injustice will be felt only by the lower orders who suffer from it;" and from thence to conclude "that it can only be corrected by violence." But in answer to this it may, in the first place, be observed that all suffer from it, the rich who engross, as well as the poor who want. Secondly, it has been endeavoured to be shown in the course of the present work(11*) that men are not so entirely governed by self-interest as has frequently been supposed. It appears, if possible, still more clearly that the selfish are not governed solely by sensual gratification or the love of gain, but that the desire of eminence and distinction is, in different forms, an universal passion.(12*) Thirdly and principally, the progress of truth is the most powerful of all causes. Nothing can be more improbable than to imagine, that theory, in the best sense of the word, is not essentially connected with practice. That which we can be persuaded clearly and distinctly to approve, will inevitably modify our conduct. When men shall habitually perceive the folly of individual splendour, and when their neighbours are impressed with a similar disdain, it will be impossible they should pursue the means of it with the same avidity as before.

It will not be difficult to trace, in the progress of modern Europe from barbarism to refinement, a tendency towards the equalization of conditions. In the feudal times, as now in India and other parts of the world, men were born to a certain station, and it was nearly impossible for a peasant to rise to the rank of a noble. Except the nobles, there were no men that were rich; for commerce, either external or internal, had scarcely an existence. Commerce was one engine for throwing down this seemingly impregnable barrier, and shocking the prejudices of nobles, who were sufficiently willing to believe that their retainers were a different species of beings from themselves. Learning was another, and more powerful engine. In all ages of the church we see men of the basest origin rising to the highest eminence. Commerce proved that others could rise to wealth beside those who were cased in mail; but learning proved that the low-born were capable of surpassing their lords. The progressive effect of these ideas may easily be traced. Long after learning began to unfold its powers, its votaries still submitted to those obsequious manners and servile dedications, which no man reviews at the present day without astonishment. It is but lately that men have known that intellectual excellence can accomplish its purposes without a patron. At present, among the civilized and well informed, a man of slender income, but of great intellectual powers and a firm and virtuous mind, is constantly received with attention and deference; and his purse-proud neighbour who should attempt to treat him superciliously, is sure to encounter a general disapprobation. The inhabitants of distant villages, where long established prejudices are slowly destroyed, would be astonished to see how comparatively small a share wealth has, in determining the degree of attention with which men are treated in enlightened circles.

These no doubt are but slight indications. It is with morality in this respect as it is with politics. The progress is at first so slow as, for the most part, to elude the observation of mankind; nor can it be adequately perceived but by the contemplation and comparison of events during a considerable portion of time. After a certain interval, the scene is more fully unfolded, and the advances appear more rapid and decisive. While wealth was every thing, it was to be expected that men would acquire it, though at the expense of conscience and integrity. The abstract ideas of justice had not yet been so concentrated, as to be able to overpower what dazzles the eye, or promises a momentary gratification. In proportion as the monopolies of rank and corporation are abolished, the value of superfluities will decline. In proportion as republicanism gains ground, men will be estimated for what they are, and not for their accidental appendages.

Let us reflect on the gradual consequences of this revolution of opinion. Liberality of dealing will be among its

earliest results" and, of consequence, accumulation will become less frequent and enormous. Men will not be disposed, as now, to take advantage of each other's distresses. They will not consider how much they can extort, but how much it is reasonable to require. The master-tradesman who employs labourers under him, will be disposed to give a more ample reward to their industry" which he is at present enabled to tax, chiefly by the accidental advantage of possessing a capital. Liberality on the part of his employer will complete in the mind of the artisan, what ideas of political justice will probably have begun. He will no longer spend the surplus of his earnings in that dissipation, which is one of the principal of those causes that at present subject him to the arbitrary pleasure of a superior. He will escape from the irresolution of slavery and the fetters of despair, and perceive that independence and ease are scarcely less within his reach than that of any other member of the community. This is an obvious step towards the still further progression, in which the labourer will receive entire whatever the consumer may be required to pay, without having a capitalist, an idle and useless monopolizer, as he will then be found, to fatten upon his spoils.

The same sentiments that lead to liberality of dealing will also lead to liberality of distribution. The trader, who is unwilling to grow rich by extorting from his customers or his workmen, will also refuse to become rich by the not inferior injustice, of withholding from his indigent neighbour the gratuitous supply of which he stands in need. The habit which was created in the former case of being contented with moderate gains, is closely connected with the habit of being contented with slender accumulation. He that is not anxious to add to his heap, will not be reluctant by a benevolent distribution to prevent its increase. Wealth was at one period almost the single object of pursuit that presented itself to the gross and uncultivated mind. Various objects will hereafter divide men's attention, the love of liberty, the love of equality, the pursuits of art and the desire of knowledge. These objects will not, as now, be confined to a few, but will gradually be laid open to all. The love of liberty obviously leads to a sentiment of union, and a disposition to sympathize in the concerns of others. The general diffusion of truth will be productive of general improvement; and men will daily approximate towards those views according to which every object will be appreciated at its true value. Add to which, that the improvement of which we speak is public, and not individual. The progress is the progress of all. Each man will find his sentiments of justice and rectitude echoed by the sentiments of his neighbours. Apostasy will be made eminently improbable, because the apostate will incur, not only his own censure, but the censure of every beholder.

One objection may perhaps be inferred from these considerations. "If the inevitable progress of improvement insensibly lead towards equality, what need was there of proposing it as a specific object to men's consideration?" The answer to this objection is easy. The improvement in question consists in a knowledge of truth. But our knowledge will be very imperfect, so long as this great branch of universal justice fails to constitute a part of it. All truth is useful; can this truth, which is perhaps the most fundamental of all moral principles, be without its benefit? Whatever be the object towards which mind irresistibly advances, it is of no mean importance to us to have a distinct view of that object. Our advances will thus become accelerated. It is a well known principle of morality "that he who proposes perfection to himself, though he will inevitably fall short of what he pursues, will make a more rapid progress, than he contented to aim only at what is imperfect." The benefits to be derived in the interval from a view of equality as one of the great objects to which we are tending, are exceedingly conspicuous. Such a view will strongly conduce to make us disinterested now. It will teach us to look with contempt upon mercantile speculations, commercial prosperity, and the cares of gain. It will impress us with a just apprehension of what it is of which man is capable, and in which his perfection consists; and will fix our ambition and activity upon the worthiest objects. Intellect cannot arrive at any great and illustrious attainment, however much the nature of intellect may carry us towards it, without feeling some presages of its approach; and it is reasonable to believe that, the earlier these presages are introduced, and the more distinct they are made, the more auspicious will be the event.

NOTES:

1. Book IV, Chap. I, II.
2. Book IV, Chap. II.
3. Book V, Chap. III.
4. Book VI, Chap. VI.
5. Book III, Chap. VII.
6. Book III, Chap. VII; Book IV, Chap I.
7. Addison's Cato, Act IV.
8. Book I, Chap. V.
9. Book VIII, Chap. X.
10. Whilst this sheet is in the press for the third impression, I receive the intelligence of the death of Burke, who was principally in the author's mind, while he penned the preceding sentences. In all that is most exalted in talents, I

regard him as the inferior of no man that ever adorned the face of earth; and, in the long record of human genius, I can find for him very few equals. In subtlety of discrimination, in magnitude of conception, in sagacity and profoundness of judgement, he was never surpassed. But his characteristic excellencies were vividness and justness of painting, and that boundless wealth of imagination that adorned the most ungrateful subjects, and heightened the most interesting. Of this wealth he was too lavish; and, though it is impossible for the man of taste not to derive gratification from almost every one of his images and metaphors while it passes before him, yet their exuberance subtracts, in no considerable degree, from that irresistibleness and rapidity of general effect, which is the highest excellence of composition. No impartial man can recall Burke to his mind, without confessing the grandeur and integrity of his feelings of morality, and being convinced that he was eminently both the patriot and the philanthropist. His excellencies however were somewhat tinged with a vein of dark and saturnine temper; so that the same man strangely united a degree of the rude character of his native island, with an urbanity and a susceptibility of the tender affections, that have rarely been paralleled. But his principal defect consisted in this; that the false estimate as to the things entitled to our deference and admiration, which could alone tender aristocracy with whom he lived, unjust to his worth, in some degree infected his own mind. He therefore sought wealth and plunged in expense, instead of cultivating the simplicity of independence; and he entangled himself with a petty combination of political men, instead of reserving his illustrious talents unwarpd, for the advancement of intellect, and the service of mankind. He unfortunately has left us a memorable example, of the power of a corrupt system of government, to undermine and divert from their genuine purposes, the noblest faculties that have yet been exhibited to the observation of the world.

11. Book IV, Chap. X
12. Book VIII, Chap. I.

[Page 1](#) * [Page 2](#) * [Page 3](#) * [Page 4](#) * [Page 5](#) * [Page 6](#) * [Page 7](#)

