

CHAPTER III

Of the Measure of Utility or of Values.

THIS word utility has a very extensive signification, for it is very abstract, or rather it is very abstract because it is abstracted from a multitude of different significations. In effect there exist utilities of many different kinds. There are some real, some illusory; if some are solid some are very futile, and we often stupidly deceive ourselves in respect to them. I could cite many examples, but they would not perhaps be to the taste of all readers. It is better that every one should choose those which please him. In general we may say that whatever is capable of procuring any advantage, even a frivolous pleasure, is *useful*. I think this is the real value of this word, for in the end all we desire is to multiply our enjoyments and to diminish our sufferings; and certainly the sentiment of pleasure and of satisfaction is a good. All goods are even nothing more than that differently modified. Whatever, then, procures it is useful.

If it is not easy to say clearly what this utility is of which we speak, it appears still much more difficult to determine its degrees; for the measure of the utility of a thing, real or supposed, is the vivacity with which it is generally desired. Now, how are we to fix the degrees of a thing so inappreciable as the vivacity of our desires? We have, however, a very sure manner of arriving at it. It is to observe the sacrifices to which these desires determine us. If, to obtain any thing whatsoever, I am disposed to give three measures of wheat which belong to me; and if, to obtain another, I am ready to part with twelve like measures,—it is evident that I desire the last four times more than the other. In like manner, if I give a man a salary triple of that which I offer another, it is clear that I value the services of the first three times more than those of the second; or, if I personally do not value them so much, it is however the value generally attached to them, so that I could not procure them at a smaller price; and, since, in fine, I make this sacrifice

freely, it is a proof that its object is worth it even to me.

In the state of society which is nothing but a continual succession of exchanges, it is thus that the values of all the products of our industry are determined. This fixation, without doubt, is not always founded on very good reasons; we are often very dear appreciators of the real merit of things. But, in fine, in relation to riches, their value is not the less that which the general opinion assigns to them; whence we see, by the way, that the greatest producer is he who performs that kind of labour most dearly paid for. It imports little whether this labour should be a branch of agricultural, manufacturing, or commercial, industry; and, from hence, we also see that, of two nations, that which has most riches, or most enjoyments, is that whose workmen are the most laborious and the most skillful in every kind, or who devote themselves to the kinds of labour most fruitful; in a word, whose labourers produce the most value in the same time.

This brings us back to the subject of which we had already begun to treat in the introduction, (sections three and four): our only original property is our physical and intellectual force. The employment of our force, our labour, is our only primitive riches. All the beings existing in nature, susceptible of becoming useful to us, are not so actually as yet. They only become so by the action which we exercise on them; by the labour, small or great, simple or complicated, which we execute to convert them to our use. They have no value for us, and with us, but by this labour, and in proportion to its success. This is not saying that if they have already become the property of any one, we must not begin by making a sacrifice to him, in order to obtain them, before disposing of them. But they have not become the property of any one, but because he has previously applied to them a labour of some kind, the fruit of which the social conventions assure to him. Thus this sacrifice itself is the price of some labour; and, previous to any labour, these beings had no actual value, and that which they have is never derived but from some employment of our force, of which they are more the object.

This employment of our force, this labour, we have also seen has a natural and necessary value; without which it would never have had an artificial and conventional one. This necessary value is the sum of the indispensable wants, the satisfaction of which is necessary to the existence of him who executes this labour, during the time he is executing it. But here, where we speak of the value which results from

the free transactions of society, it is clearly seen that we have in view the conventional and market value; that which general opinion attaches to things, erroneously or reasonably. If it is less than the wants of the labourer, he must devote himself to some other industry, or he must perish. If it is strictly equal to them he subsists with difficulty. If it is greater he grows rich, provided always that he is economical. In every case this conventional and market value is the real one, in relation to riches; it is the true measure of the utility of the production, since it fixes its price.

However, this conventional value, this market price, is not solely the expression of the estimation in which we generally hold a thing. It varies according to the wants and means of the producer and consumer, of the buyer and of the seller; for the product of my labour, even should it have cost me much time and pains, if I am pressed to dispose of it, if there are many similar to be sold, or if there are but small means of paying for it,—I must necessarily part with it for a low price. On the contrary, if the buyers are numerous, urgent, rich, I may sell very dear what I have procured very easily.* It is therefore on different circumstances, and on the equilibrium of the resistance between sellers and buyers, that the market price depends; but it is not less true, that it is the measure of the value of things, and of the utility of the labour which produces them.

There is, however, another way of considering the utility of labour, but that is less relative to the individual than to the human species in general. I explain myself by an example. Before the invention of the stocking loom, a man, or a woman, by knitting could make a pair of stockings in a given time; and received wages proportionate to the degree of interest which was taken in the procurement of the product of that labour, and to the difficulty of this particular labour comparatively with all other kinds. Things thus regulated the stocking loom is invented; and, I suppose that by means of this machine, the same person, without more trouble or more knowledge, can execute precisely three times as much work as before, and of the same quality. It is not doubtful but at first it would be paid three times higher for to those who wear stockings, the manner in which they have been made

*Merchants know well that to prosper there is no other mean, but to render the merchandise agreeable, and to be within reach of the rich? Why do not nations think the same? They would rivalise industry only, and would never think of desiring the impoverishment of their neighbours;—they would be happy.

is indifferent. But this machine, and the small talents necessary for working it, will quickly multiply, since the industry of those who dedicate themselves to this labour is supposed neither to be more painful, nor more difficult, than the industry of those who knit; it is certain they will not have greater wages, although they do three times more work.* Their labour, then, will not be more productive for them; but it will be so for society, taken in mass,—for there will be three times as many persons supplied with stockings for the same sum; or rather, to consider only the fabrication of the stockings, every one can have now as many as he could formerly for the third of the money it then required, and consequently will have two-thirds remaining to supply other wants. We may say as much of him who bruised corn between two stones before the invention of mills, with respect to the miller, who does not perhaps gain more; but who grinds an hundred times more, and better. This is the great advantage of civilized and enlightened society: every one finds himself better provided in every way, with fewer sacrifices,—because the labourers produce a greater mass of utility in the same time.

It is this also, by the by, which shows the error of those who, to judge of the greater or less degree of ease of the poor classes of society in other times, compare only the price of a day's work with the price of grain; and who, if they find that the first has less increased than the second, conclude that the labourers are more straitened than they were. This is not exact, and probably not true; for, first, we do not eat grain in its natural state; and it may happen that it may have augmented in price, while bread has not, if we now grind and bake more economically. Moreover, although bread is the principal expense of the poor, he has also other wants. If the arts have made progress, he may be better lodged, better clothed, have better drink, for the same price. If the society is better regulated, he may find a more regular employment for his labour, and be more certain of not being troubled in the possession of that which he has gained. In fine, it may very well be, that for the same sum he enjoys more, or at least suffers less. The elements of this calculation are so numerous, that it is very difficult, and perhaps impossible, to make it directly. We shall see in the sequel other means of deciding this question, but at this moment it leads us from the object with which we are occupied. Let us return.

*I abstract the price of the machine, and the interest it ought to yield.

We have seen that the sole and only source of all our enjoyments, of all our riches, is the employment of our force, our labour, our industry, that the true production of this industry is utility; that the measure of this utility is the salary it obtains; and besides that the quantity of utility produced is what composes the sum of our means of existence and enjoyment. Now let us examine the two great branches of this industry, the change of form and the change of place, the fabrication and the transportation, or that which is called manufacturing and commercial industry.