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Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind

NATIONAL GENIUS AND THE ENVIRONMENT (BOOK VII)

The picture of nations hitherto sketched must be considered only as the foreground, serving as a basis to farther observations: while its groups answer the purpose of the *templa* of the augurs in the skies, forming definite spaces for our contemplation, and aids to our memory. Let us see what they afford towards a philosophy of our species.

CHAPTER 1: NOTWITHSTANDING THE VARIETIES OF THE HUMAN FORM, THERE IS BUT ONE AND THE SAME SPECIES OF MAN THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE OF OUR EARTH

No two leaves of any one tree in nature are to be found perfectly alike; and still less do two human faces, or human frames, resemble each other. Of what endless variety is our artful structure susceptible! Our solids are decomposable into such minute and multifariously interwoven fibres, as no eye can trace; and these are connected by a gluten of such a delicate composition, as the utmost skill is insufficient to analyze. Yet these constitute the least part of us: They are nothing more than the containing vessels and conduits of the variously compounded, highly animated fluid, existing in much greater quantity, by means of which we live and enjoy life. "No man," says Haller, "is exactly similar to another in his internal structure: the courses of the nerves and blood vessels differ in millions and millions of cases, so that amid the variations of these delicate parts, we are scarcely able to discover in what they agree."[1] But if the eye of the anatomist can perceive this infinite variety, how much greater must that be, which dwells in the invisible powers of such an artful organization! So that every man is ultimately a world, in external appearance indeed similar to others, but internally an individual being, with whom no other coincides. [. . .]

As the human intellect, however, seeks unity in every kind of variety, and the divine mind, its prototype, has stamped the most innumerable multiplicity upon the Earth with unity, we may venture from the vast realm of change to revert to the simplest position: *All mankind are only one and the same species.*

How many ancient fables of human monsters and prodigies have already disappeared before the light of history! And where tradition still repeats remnants of these, I am fully convinced, more accurate inquiry will explain them into more beautiful truths. We are now acquainted with the ourang-outang, and know, that he has no claim to speech, or to be considered as man: And when we have a more exact account of the ourang-kubub, and ourang-guhu, the tailed savages of the woods in Borneo, Sumatra, and the Nicobar Islands will vanish. The men with reverted feet in Malacca, the probably rickety nation of dwarfs in Madagascar, the men habited like women in Florida, and some others, deserve such an investigation as has already been bestowed on the albinoes, the dondoes, the Patagonians, and the aprons of the Hottentot females.[2] Men, who succeed in removing wants from the creation, falsehoods from our memory, and disgraces from our nature, are to the realms of truth, what the heroes of mythology were to the primitive world; they lessen the number of monsters on the Earth. [. . .]

For each genus Nature has done enough, and to each has given its proper progeny. The ape she has divided into as many species and varieties as possible, and extended these as far as she could: but thou, O man, honour thyself: neither the pongo nor the gibbon is thy brother: the American and the Negro are: these therefore thou shouldst not oppress, or murder, or steal; for they are men, like thee: with the ape thou canst not enter into fraternity.

Lastly, I could wish the distinctions between the human species, that have been made from a laudable zeal for discriminating science, not carried beyond due bounds. Some for instance have thought fit, to employ the term of *races* for four or five divisions, originally made in consequence of country or complexion: but I see no reason for this appellation. Race refers to a difference of origin, which in this case either does not exist, or in each of these countries, and under each of these complexions, comprises the most different races. For every nation is one people, having its own national form, as well as its own language: the climate, it is true, stamps on each its mark, or spreads over it a slight veil, but not sufficient to destroy the original national character. This originality of character extends even to families, and its transitions are as variable as imperceptible. In short, there are neither four or five races, nor exclusive varieties, on this Earth. Complexions run into each other: forms follow the genetic character: and upon the whole, all are at last but shades of the same great picture, extending through all ages, and over all parts of the Earth. They belong not, therefore, so properly to systematic natural history, as to the physico-geographical history of man.

CHAPTER 2: THE ONE SPECIES OF MAN HAS NATURALIZED ITSELF IN EVERY CLIMATE UPON EARTH

Observe you locusts of the Earth, the Kalmuc and Mungal: they are fitted for no region but their own hills and mountains.[3] The light rider flies on his little horse over immense tracts of the desert; he knows how to invigorate his fainting courser, and by opening a vein in his neck, to restore his own powers, when he sinks with fatigue. No rain falls on many parts of these regions, which are refreshed solely by the dew, while inexhaustible fertility clothes the earth with continually renovated verdure. Throughout many extensive tracts no tree is to be seen, no spring of fresh water to be discovered. Here these wild tribes, yet preserving good order among themselves, wander about among the luxuriant grass, and pasture their herds: the horses, their associates, know their voices, and live like them in peace. With thoughtless indifference sits the indolent Kalmuc, contemplating the undisturbed serenity of his sky, while his ear catches every sound, that pervades the desert his eye is unable to scan. In every other region of the Earth the Mungal has either degenerated or improved: in his own country he is what he was thousands of years ago, and such will he continue, as long as it remains unaltered by Nature or by art.

The Arab of the desert belongs to it, as much as his noble horse, and his patient, indefatigable camel.[4] As the Mungal wanders over his heights, and among his hills, so wanders the better-formed Bedouin over his extensive Asiatic-African deserts; also a nomad, but a nomad of *his own* region. With this his simple clothing, his maxims of life, his manners, and his character, are in unison; and, after the lapse of thousands of years, his tent still preserves the wisdom of his forefathers. A lover of liberty, he despises wealth and pleasure, is fleet in the course, a dextrous manager of his horse, of whom he is as careful as of himself, and equally dextrous in handling the javelin. His figure is lean and muscular; his complexion brown; his bones strong. He is indefatigable in supporting labour, bold and enterprising, faithful to his word, hospitable and magnanimous, and, connected with his fellows by the desert, he makes one common cause with all. From the dangers of his mode of life he has imbibed wariness and shy mistrust; from his solitary abode, the feelings of revenge, friendship, enthusiasm, and pride. Wherever an Arab is found, on the Nile or the Euphrates, on Libanus or in Senegal, nay even in Zanguebar or the islands of the Indian Ocean, if a foreign climate has not by length of time changed him into a colonist, he will display his original Arabian character.

The Californian, on the verge of the earth, in his barren country, exposed as he is to want, and amid the vicissitudes of his climate, complains not of heat or cold, eludes the force of hunger, though with the utmost difficulty, and enjoys happiness in his native land. "God alone can tell," says a missionary,

how many thousand miles a Californian, that has attained the age of eighty, must have wandered over before he finds a grave. Many of them change their quarters perhaps a hundred times in a year, sleeping scarcely three nights together on the same spot, or in the same region. They lie down wherever night overtakes them, without paying the least regard to the filthiness of the soil, or endeavouring to secure themselves from noxious vermin. Their dark brown skin serves them instead of coat and cloak. Their furniture consists of a bow and arrows, a stone for a knife, a bone or sharp stake to dig up roots, the shell of a tortoise for a cradle, a gut or a bladder to carry water, and, if they be peculiarly fortunate, a pouch made of the fibres of the aloe, somewhat in the fashion of a net, to contain their utensils and provision. They feed on roots, and all sorts of small seeds, even those of grass, which they collect with great labour; nay, when pressed by want, they pick them out of their own dung. Every thing that can be called flesh, or barely resembles it, even to bats, grubs, and worms, is to be reckoned among the dainties, on which they feast; and the leaves of certain shrubs, with their young shoots, leather, and spungy bones, are not excluded from their list of provision, when urged by hunger. Yet these poor creatures are healthy: they live to a great age, and are strong; so that it is uncommon to see a man grayheaded, and never but at a late period. They are always cheerful; forever jesting and laughing; well made, straight, and active; they can lift stones and other things from the ground with their two foremost toes; they walk as erect as a dart to the extreme of old age; and the children go alone before they are a year old. When weary of talking, they lie down and sleep, till awakened by hunger, or the desire of eating: and as soon as they are awake, the laugh, the talk, and the jest, recommence. Thus they go on, till worn out by old age, when they meet death with calm indifference. [. . .]

In the first place it is obvious why all sensual people, fashioned to their country, are so much attached to the soil, and so inseparable from it. The constitution of their body, their way of life, the pleasures and occupations to which they have been accustomed from their infancy, and the whole circle of their ideas, are climatic. Deprive them of their country, you deprive them of everything. [. . .]

No words can express the sorrow and despair of a bought or stolen negro slave, when he leaves his native shore, never more to behold it while he has breath. "Great care must be taken," says Römer,

> that the slaves do not get hold of a knife, either in the fort, or aboard the ship. To keep them in good humour on their passage to the West Indies requires the utmost exertion. For this purpose violins are provided, with fifes and drums; they are permitted to dance; and they are assured, that they are going to a pleasant country, where they may have as many wives as they please, and plenty of good food. Yet many deplorable instances have been known of their falling upon the crew, murdering them, and letting the ship drive ashore.[5]

But how many more deplorable instances have been known of these poor stolen wretches destroying themselves in despair! Sparmann informs us, from the mouth of a slavedealer, that at night they are seized with a kind of frenzy, which prompts them to commit murder, either on themselves or others; "for the painful recollection of the irreparable loss of their country and their freedom commonly awakes by night, when the bustle of the day ceases to engage their attention."[6] And what right have you, monsters! even to approach the country of these unfortunates, much less to tear them from it by stealth, fraud, and cruelty? For ages this quarter of the Globe has been theirs, and they belong to it: their forefathers purchased it at a dear rate, at the price of the Negro form and complexion. In fashioning them the African sun has adopted them as its children, and impressed on them its own seal: wherever you convey them, this brands you as robbers, as stealers of men.

Secondly. Thus the wars of savages for their country, or on account of its children, their brethren, torn from it, or degraded and oppressed, are extremely cruel. Hence, for instance, the lasting hatred of the natives of America toward Europeans, even when these behave to them with tenderness: they cannot suppress the feeling: "This land is ours; you have no business here." Hence the treachery of all savages, as they are called, even when they appear altogether satisfied with the courtesy of European visitors. The moment their hereditary national feelings awake, the flame they have long with difficulty smothered breaks out, rages with violence, and frequently is not appeased, till the flesh of the stranger has been torn by the teeth of the native. To us this seems horrible; and it is so, no doubt: yet the Europeans first urged them to this misdeed: for why did they visit their country? why did they enter it as despots, arbitrarily practicing violence and extortion?[7] For ages it had been to its inhabitants the universe: they had inherited it from their fathers, and from them too they had inherited the barbarous practice of destroying in the most savage manner all, who would deprive them of their territory, tear them from it, or encroach upon their rights. Thus to them an enemy and a stranger are the same: they resemble the *muscipula*, which, rooted to its soil, attacks every insect that approaches it: the right of devouring an unbidden or unfriendly guest is the tribute they exact; as *Cyclopical* a tribute as any in Europe. [. . .]

Humanity, the End of Human Nature (Book XV)

CHAPTER 3: THE HUMAN RACE IS DESTINED TO PROCEED THROUGH VARIOUS DEGREES OF CIVILIZATION, IN VARIOUS MUTATIONS; BUT THE PERMANENCY OF ITS WELFARE IS FOUNDED SOLELY AND ESSENTIALLY ON REASON AND JUSTICE

First natural law. It is demonstrated in physical mathematics, that *to the permanent condition of a thing a sort of perfection is requisite, a maximum or*

minimum, arising out of the mode of action of the powers of that thing. Thus, for example, our Earth could not possess durability, if its centre of gravity did not lie deep within it, and all its powers act to and from this, in equiponderating harmony. Every stable being, therefore, bears in itself, according to this beautiful law of nature, its physical truth, goodness, and necessity, as the grounds of its stability.

Second natural law. It is in like manner demonstrated, *that all perfection and beauty of compound, limited things, or systems of them, rest on such a maximum.* Thus similitude and difference, simplicity in means and diversity in effects, the slightest application of power to attain the most certain or profitable end, form a kind of symmetry and harmonious proportion, universally observed by Nature, in her laws of motion, in the form of her creatures, in the greatest things and in the least; and imitated by the art of man, as far as his powers extend. In this, many rules limit each other, so that what would be greater according to one is diminished by another, till the compound whole attains the most beautiful form, with the greatest economy, and at the same time internal consistency, goodness, and truth. An excellent law, which banishes from Nature everything arbitrary, and all disorder; and displays to us, even in every variable and limited part of the creation, a rule of the highest beauty.

Third natural law. It is equally proved, that, *if a being, or system of beings, be forced out of this permanent condition of its truth, goodness, and beauty, it will again approach it by its internal powers, either in vibrations, or in an asymptote; as out of this state it finds no stability.* The more active and multifarious the powers, the less is the imperceptible straight course of the asymptote possible, and the more violent the vibrations and oscillations, till the disturbed subject attain an equilibrium of its powers, or harmony in their movements, and therewith the permanent condition essential to it.

Now as mankind, both taken as a whole, and in its particular individuals, societies, and nations, is a permanent natural system of the most multifarious living powers; let us examine, wherein its stability consists; in what point its highest beauty, truth, and goodness, unite; and what course it takes, in order to reapproach its permanent condition, on every aberration from it, of which many are exhibited to us by history and experience.

1. The human species is such a copious scheme of energies and capacities, that, as everything in nature rests on the most determinate individuality, its great and numerous capacities could not appear on our planet otherwise than *divided among millions.* Everything has been born, that could be born upon it; and everything has maintained itself, that could acquire a state of permanence according to the laws of Nature. Thus every individual bears within himself that symmetry, for which he is made, and to which he must mould himself, both in his bodily figure, and mental capacities. Human existence appears in every shape and kind, from the most sickly deformity, that can scarcely support life, to the superhuman form of a Grecian demi-

god; from the passionate ardour of the Negro brain, to the capacity for consummate wisdom. Through faults and errors, through education, necessity, and exercise, every mortal seeks the symmetry of his powers; as in this alone the most complete enjoyment of his existence lies: yet few are sufficiently fortunate, to attain it in the purest, happiest manner.

2. As an individual man can subsist of himself but very imperfectly, *a superior maximum of cooperating powers* is formed with every society. These powers contend together in wild confusion, till, agreeably to the unfailing laws of Nature, opposing regulations limit each other, and a kind of equilibrium and harmony of movement takes place. Thus nations modify themselves, according to time, place, and their internal character; each bears in itself the standard of its perfection, totally independent of all comparison with that of others. Now the more pure and fine the maximum on which a people hit, the more useful the objects to which it applied the exertions of its nobler powers, and, lastly, the more firm and exact the bond of union, which most intimately connected all the members of the state, and guided them to this good end; the more stable was the nation itself, and the more brilliant the figure it made in history. The course that we have hitherto taken through certain nations shows how different, according to place, time, and circumstances, was the object for which they strove. With the Chinese it was refined political morality; with the Hindoos, a kind of retired purity, quiet assiduity in labour, and endurance; with the Phenicians, the spirit of navigation, and commercial industry. The culture of the Greeks, particularly at Athens, proceeded on the maximum of sensible beauty, both in arts and manners, in science and in political institutions. In Sparta, and in Rome, men emulated the virtues of the patriot and hero; in each, however, in a very different mode. Now as in all these most depended on time and place, the ancients will scarcely admit of being compared with each other in the most distinguished features of national fame.

3. In all, however, we see the operation of *one principle*, namely *human reason*, which endeavours to produce unity out of multiplicity, order out of disorder, and out of variety of powers and designs one symmetrical and durably beautiful whole. From the shapeless artificial rocks, with which the Chinese ornaments his garden, to the Egyptian pyramid, or the ideal beauty of Greece, the plan and design of a reflecting understanding are everywhere observable, though in very different degrees. The more refined the reflections of this understanding were, and the nearer it came to the point, which is the highest in its kind, and admits no deviation to the right or to the left; the more were its performances to be considered as models, for they contain eternal rules for the human understanding in all ages. Thus nothing of the kind can be conceived superior to an Egyptian pyramid, or to several Greek and Roman works of art. They are simple solutions of certain problems of the understanding, which admit no arbitrary supposition, that the problems are perhaps not yet solved, or might be solved in a

better way; for in them the simple idea of what they ought to be is displayed in the easiest, fullest, and most beautiful manner. Every deviation from them would be a fault; and were they to be repeated and diversified in a thousand modes, we must still return to that single point, which is the highest of its kind.

4. Thus through all the polished nations, that we have hitherto considered, or shall hereafter consider, *a chain of cultivation* may be drawn, flying off in extremely divergent curves. In each it designates increasing and decreasing greatness, and has maximums of every kind. Many of these exclude or limit one another, till at length a certain symmetry takes place in the whole; so that were we to reason from one perfection of any nation concerning another, we should form very treacherous conclusions. Thus, because Athens had exquisite orators, it does not follow, that its form of government must likewise have been the best possible; or that, because the Chinese moralize so excellently, their state must be a pattern for all others. Forms of government refer to a very different maximum, from that of beautiful morals, or a pathetic oration; notwithstanding, at bottom, all things in any nation have a certain connexion, if it be only that of exclusion and limitation. No other maximum, but that of the most perfect bond of union, produces the most happy states; even supposing the people are in consequence obliged to dispense with many shining qualities.

5. But in one and the same nation every maximum of its commendable endeavours ought not and cannot endure forever; since it is but one point in the progress of time. This incessantly moves on; and the more numerous the circumstances, on which the beautiful effect depends, the sooner is it liable to pass away. Happy if its masterpieces remain as rules for future ages; since those that immediately succeed approach them too near, and will probably obliterate by attempting to excel them. Even the most active people frequently sink most speedily from the boiling to the freezing point. [. . .]

8. Thus the propagation of families and traditions, connected human reason: not as if it were in each individual no more than a fragment of the whole, a whole existing nowhere in one subject, and therefore by no means the end of the Creator; but because the disposition and concatenation of the whole species led to this. As men are propagated, so are animals; yet no general animal reason arises from their generations: but as reason alone gives permanency to mankind, it must be propagated, as the characteristic of the species; for without it the species would cease to be.

9. In the species, as a whole, reason has experienced the same fate, as in its individual members; for of individual members the whole consists. It has often been disturbed by the wild passions of men, acting with still more violence from conjunction, turned out of its way for centuries, and lain as if dormant beneath its ashes. To all these disorders Providence has applied no other remedy, than what she administers to individuals; namely, that each fault should be followed by its correspondent evil, and every act of

indolence, folly, malice, rashness, and injustice, be its own punishment. But as the species appears in collective bodies in such circumstances, children must suffer for the faults of their parents, the people for the folly of their rulers, and posterity for the indolence of their ancestors; and if they will not, or cannot, correct the evil, they may suffer under it for ages.

10. Thus the weal of the whole is the greatest good of each individual: for it is the inherent right and duty of everyone, who suffers under its evils, to ward off these evils from himself, and diminish them for his fellows. Nature has not calculated for sovereigns and states, but for the welfare of men. The former suffer not so speedily for their vices and follies as individuals, because they always reckon only with the whole, in which the miseries of the poor are long suppressed; but the state ultimately suffers, and with so much more violent a concussion. In all these things the laws of retaliation display themselves, as do the laws of motion on the shock of the slightest physical substance; and the greatest sovereign of Europe is not less subject to the natural laws of the human species, than the least of his people. This condition merely binds him, to be an economist of these natural laws; and, by that power, which he enjoys only through the means of other men, to be for other men a wise and good terrestrial divinity.

11. In general history, too, as in the lives of careless individuals, all the follies and vices of mankind are exhausted; till at length they are compelled by necessity, to learn reason and justice. Whatever can happen, happens; and produces, what from its nature it can produce. This law of Nature hinders not even the most eccentric power in its operation; but it confines all by the rule, that one opposing effect destroys another, and what is useful alone ultimately remains. The evil, that destroys another, must submit to order, or destroy itself. The rational and virtuous are uniformly happy in the kingdom of God; for virtue requires external reward, no more than reason covets it. If their works are not accompanied by external success, not to them, but to their age will be the loss: yet neither the discord nor folly of man can forever counteract them; they will succeed, when their time arrives.

12. Still human Reason pursues her course in the species in general: she invents, before she can apply; she discovers, though evil hands may long abuse her discoveries. Abuse will correct itself; and, through the unwearied zeal of ever-growing Reason, disorder will in time become order. By contending against passions, she strengthens and enlightens herself: from being oppressed in this place, she will fly to that, and extend the sphere of her sway over the Earth. There is nothing enthusiastical in the hope, that, wherever men dwell, at some future period will dwell men rational, just, and happy: happy, not through the means of their own reason alone, but of the common reason of their whole fraternal race.

I bend before this lofty sketch of the general wisdom of Nature with regard to the whole of my fellow creatures the more willingly, as I perceive, that it is Nature's universal plan. The law that sustained the mundane system,

and formed each crystal, each worm, each flake of snow, formed and sustained also the human species: it made its own nature the basis of its continuance, and progressive action, as long as men shall exist. All the works of God have their stability in themselves, and in their beautiful consistency: for they all repose, within their determinate limits, on the equilibrium of contending powers, by their intrinsic energy, which reduces these to order. [. . .]

The problem of humanity has been solved a thousand ways around me, yet everywhere the result of man's endeavours is the same: "The essence, the object, and the fate of our species, rest on understanding and justice." There is no nobler use of history than this: it unfolds to us as it were the counsels of Fate, and teaches us, insignificant as we are, to act according to God's eternal laws. By teaching us the faults and consequences of every species of irrationality, it assigns us our short and tranquil scene on that great theatre, where Reason and Goodness, contending indeed with wild powers, still, from their nature, create order, and hold on in the path of victory.

Hitherto we have been wandering through the obscure field of ancient nations: we now joyfully advance to approaching day, and view the harvest, that the seed of antiquity has produced for succeeding ages. Rome destroyed the balance of nations; and under her a World bled to death: What new state will arise from this balance destroyed? What new creature will spring from the ashes of so many nations?

NOTES

1. Preface to Buffon's *Nat. Hist.*, vol. III.
2. See Sparmann's *Voyage*, 177.
3. The account given by G. Opitz of his life and imprisonment among a Kalmuc horde at Yaik would be a very descriptive picture of their mode of living, if it were not embellished with so many of the editor's remarks, which give it an air of romance.
4. Besides the many ancient travels in Arabia see those of Pagès, vol. II, 62–87.
5. Römer's *Nachrichten von der Küste Guinea* (Account of the Coast of Guinea), 279.
6. Sparmann's *Voyages*, 73. This humane traveler has interspersed through his work many melancholy accounts of the capture and treatment of slaves (see pp. 195, 612, etc.).
7. See the editor's remarks on the unfortunate Marion's *Voyage à la Mer du Sud* (Voyage to the South Sea): also R. Forster's preface to the *Journal of Cook's Last Voyage* (Berlin, 1781) and the accounts of the conduct of the Europeans.