The Perfectibility of Man

Marquis de Condorcet

If Priestley's is the classic English-language expression of Enlightenment "perfectionism, " than Condorcet's is the French. This selection is from the introduction to his Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Human Mind *(1794).*

Man is born with the faculty of receiving sensations. In *those* which he receives, he is capable of perceiving and of distinguishing the simple sensations of which they are composed. He can retain, recognize, and combine them. He can preserve or recall them to his memory; he can compare their different combinations; he can ascertain what they possess in common, and what characterizes each; lastly, he can affix signs to all these objects, the better to know them, and the more *easily* to form from them new combinations.

This faculty is developed in him by the action of external objects, that is, by the presence of certain complex sensations, the constancy of which, whether in their identical whole, or in the laws of their change, is independent of him. It is also exercised by communication with other similarly organized individuals, and by all the artificial means which, from the first development of this faculty, men have succeeded in inventing.

Sensations are accompanied with pleasure or pain, and man has the further faculty of converting these momentary impressions into durable sentiments of a corresponding nature, and of experiencing these sentiments either at the sight or recollection of the pleasure or pain of beings sensitive like himself. And from this faculty, united with that of forming and combining ideas, arise, between him and his fellow creatures, the ties of interest and duty, to which nature has affixed the most exquisite portion of our felicity, and the most poignant of our sufferings.

Were we to confine our observations to an enquiry into the general facts and unvarying laws which the development of these faculties presents to us, in what is common to the different individuals of the human species, our enquiry would bear the name of metaphysics.

But if we consider this development in its results, relative to the mass of individuals co-existing at the same time on a given space, and follow it from generation to generation, it then exhibits a picture of the progress of human intellect. This progress is subject to the same general laws, observable in the individual development of our faculties; being the result of that very development

considered at once in a great number of individuals united in society. Bur the result which every instant presents, depends upon that of the preceding instants, and has an influence on the instants which follow.

This picture, therefore, is historical; since, subjected as it will be to perpetual variations, it is formed by the successive observation of human societies at the different eras through which they have passed. It will accordingly exhibit the order in which the changes have taken place, explain the influence of every past period upon that which follows it, and thus show, by the modifications which the human species has experienced, in its incessant renovation through the immensity of ages, the course which it has pursued, and the steps which it has advanced toward knowledge and happiness. From these observations on what man has heretofore been, and what he is at present, we shall be led to the means of securing and of accelerating the still further progress, of which, from his nature, we may indulge the hope.

Such is the object of the work I have undertaken; the result of which will be to show, from reasoning and from facts, that no bounds have been fixed to the improvement of the human faculties; that the perfectibility of man is absolutely indefinite; that the progress of this perfectibility, henceforth above the control of every power that would impede it, has no other limit than the duration of the globe upon which nature has placed us. The course of this progress may doubtless be more or less rapid, but it can never be retrograde; at least while the earth retains its situation in the system of the universe, and the laws of this system shall neither effect upon the globe a general overthrow, nor introduce such changes as would no longer permit the human race to preserve and exercise therein the same faculties, and find the same resources.

The first state of civilization observable in the human species, is that of a society of men, few in number, subsisting by means of hunting and fishing, unacquainted with every art but the imperfect one of fabricating in an uncouth manner their arms and some household utensils, and of constructing or digging for themselves a habitation; yet already in possession of a language for the communication of their wants, and a small number of moral ideas, from which are deduced their common rules of conduct, living in families, conforming themselves to general customs that serve instead of laws, and having even a rude form of government.

In this state it is apparent that the uncertainty and difficulty of procuring subsistence, and the unavoidable alternative of extreme fatigue or an absolute repose, leave not to man the leisure in which, by resigning himself to meditation, he might enrich his mind with new combinations. The means of satisfying his wants are even too dependent upon chance and the seasons, usefully to excite an industry, the progressive improvement of which might be transmitted to his progeny; and accordingly the attention of each is confined to the improvement of his individual skill and address.

For this reason, the progress of the human species must in this stage have been extremely slow; it could make no advance but at distant intervals, and when

favored by extraordinary circumstances. Meanwhile, to the subsistence derived from hunting and fishing, or from the fruits which the earth spontaneously offered, succeeds the sustenance afforded by the animals which man has tamed, and which he knows how to preserve and multiply. To these means is afterwards added an imperfect agriculture; he is no longer content with the fruit or the plants which chance throws in his way; he learns to form a stock of them, to collect them around him, to sow or to plant them, to favor their reproduction by the labor of culture.

Property, which, in the first state, was confined to his household utensils, his arms, his nets, and the animals he killed, is now extended to his flock, and next to the land which he has cleared and cultivated. Upon the death of its head, this property naturally devolves to the family. Some individuals possess a superfluity capable of being preserved. If it be absolute, it gives rise to new wants. If confined to a single article, while the proprietor feels the want of other articles, this want suggests the idea of exchange. Hence moral relations multiply, and become complicated. A greater security, a more certain and more constant leisure, afford time for meditation, or at least for a continued series of observations. The custom is introduced, as to some individuals, of giving a part of their superfluity in exchange for labor, by which they might be exempt from labor themselves. There accordingly exists a class of men whose time is not engrossed by corporeal exertions, and whose desires extend beyond their simple wants. Industry awakes; the arts already known, expand and improve; the facts which chance presents to the observation of the most attentive and best cultivated minds, bring to light new arts; as the means of living become less dangerous and less precarious, population increases; agriculture, which can provide for a greater number of individuals upon the same space of ground, supplies the place of the other sources of subsistence; it favors the multiplication of the species, by which it is favored in its turn; in a society become more sedentary, more connected, more intimate, ideas that have been acquired communicate themselves more quickly, and are perpetuated with more certainty. And now the dawn of the sciences begins to appear; man exhibits an appearance distinct from the other classes of animals, and is no longer like them confined to an improvement purely individual.

The more extensive, more numerous and more complicated relations which men now form with each other, cause them to feel the necessity of having a mode of communicating their ideas to the absent, of preserving the remembrance of a fact with more precision than by oral tradition, of fixing the conditions of an agreement more securely than by the memory of witnesses, of stating, in a way less liable to change, those respected customs to which the members of any society agree to submit their conduct.

Accordingly the want of writing is felt, and the art invented. It appears at first to have been an absolute painting, to which succeeded a conventional painting, preserving such traits only as were characteristic of the objects. Afterwards, by a kind of metaphor analogous to that which was already introduced into their

language, the image of a physical object became expressive of moral ideas. The origin of those signs, like the origin of words, was liable in time to be forgotten; and writing became the art of affixing signs of convention to every idea, every word, and of consequence to every combination of ideas and words.

There was now a language that was written, and a language that was spoken, which it was necessary equally to learn, between which there must be established a reciprocal correspondence.

Some men of genius, the eternal benefactors of the human race, but whose names and even country are forever buried in oblivion, observed that all the words of a language were only the combinations of a very limited number of primitive articulations; but that this number, small as it was, was sufficient to form a quantity almost infinite of different combinations. Hence they conceived the idea of representing by visible signs, not the ideas or the words that answered to them, but those simple elements of which the words are composed.

Alphabetical writing was then introduced. A small number of signs served to express everything in this mode, as a small number of sounds sufficed to express everything orally. The language written and the language spoken were the same; all that was necessary was to be able to know, and to form, the few given signs; and this last step secured forever the progress of the human race.

It would perhaps be desirable at the present day, to institute a written language, which, devoted to the sole use of the sciences, expressing only such combinations of simple ideas as are found to be exactly the same in every mind, employed only upon reasonings of logical strictness, upon operations of the mind precise and determinate, might be understood by men of every country, and be translated into all their idioms, without being, like those idioms, liable to corruption, by passing into common use.

Then, singular as it may appear, this kind of writing, the preservation of which would only have served to prolong ignorance, would become, in the hands of philosophy, a useful instrument for the speedy propagation of knowledge, and advancement of the sciences.

It is between this degree of civilization and that in which we still find the savage tribes, that we must place every people whose history has been handed down to us, and who, sometimes making new advancements, sometimes plunging themselves again into ignorance, sometimes floating between the two alternatives or stopping at a certain limit, sometimes totally disappearing from the earth under the sword of conquerors, mixing with those conquerors, or living in slavery; lastly, sometimes receiving knowledge from a more enlightened people, to transmit it to other nations—form an unbroken chain of connection between the earliest periods of history and the age in which we live, between the first people known to us, and the present nations of Europe.

In the picture then which I mean to sketch, three distinct parts are perceptible.

In the first, in which the relations of travelers exhibit to us the condition of

mankind in the least civilized nations, we are obliged to guess by what steps man in an isolated state, or rather confined to the society necessary for the propagation of the species, was able to acquire those first degrees of improvement, the last term of which is the use of an articulate language: an acquisition that presents the most striking feature, and indeed the only one, a few more extensive moral ideas and a slight commencement of social order excepted, which distinguishes him from animals living like himself in regular and permanent society. In this part of our picture, then, we can have no other guide than an investigation of the development of our faculties.

To this first guide, in order to follow man to the point in which he exercises arts, in which the rays of science begin to enlighten him, in which nations are united by commercial intercourse; in which, in fine, alphabetical writing is invented, we may add the history of the several societies that have been observed in almost every intermediate state: though we can follow no individual one through all the space which separates these two grand epochs of the human race.

Here the picture begins to take its coloring in great measure from the series of facts transmitted to us by history: but it is necessary to select these facts from that of different nations, and at the same time compare and combine them, to form the supposed history of a single people, and delineate its progress.

From the period that alphabetical writing was known in Greece, history is connected by an uninterrupted series of facts and observations, with the period in which we live, with the present state of mankind in the most enlightened countries of Europe; and the picture of the progress and advancement of the human mind becomes strictly historical. Philosophy has no longer anything to guess, has no more hypothetical combinations to form; all it has to do is to collect and arrange facts, and exhibit the useful truths which arise from them as a whole, and from the different bearings of their several parts.

There remains only a third picture to form—that of our hopes, or the progress reserved for future generations, which the constancy of the laws of nature seems to secure to mankind. And here it will be necessary to show by what steps this progress, which at present may appear chimerical, is gradually to be rendered possible, and even easy; how truth, in spite of the transient success of prejudices, and the support they receive from the corruption of governments or of the people, must in the end obtain a durable triumph; by what ties nature has indissolubly united the advancement of knowledge with the progress of liberty, virtue, and respect for the natural rights of man; how these blessings, the only real ones, though so frequently seen apart as to be thought incompatible, must necessarily amalgamate and become inseparable, the moment knowledge shall have arrived at a certain pitch in a great number of nations at once, the moment it shall have penetrated the whole mass of a great people, whose language shall have become universal, and whose commercial intercourse shall embrace the whole extent of the globe. This union having once taken place in the whole enlightened class of men, this class will be considered as the friends of human kind, exerting themselves in concert to advance the improvement and happiness of the species.

We shall expose the origin and trace the history of general errors, which have more or less contributed to retard or suspend the advance of reason, and sometimes even, as much as political events, have been the cause of man's taking a retrograde course toward ignorance.

Those operations of the mind that lead to or retain us in error, from the subtle paralogism, by which the most penetrating mind may be deceived, to the mad reveries of enthusiasts, belong equally, with that just mode of reasoning that conducts us to truth, to the theory of the development of our individual faculties; and for the same reason, the manner in which general errors are introduced, propagated, transmitted, and rendered permanent among nations, forms a part of the picture of the progress of the human mind. Like truths which improve and enlighten it, they are the consequence of its activity, and of the disproportion that always exists between what it actually knows, what it has the desire to know, and what it conceives there is a necessity of acquiring.

It is even apparent that, from the general laws of the development of our faculties, certain prejudices must necessarily spring up in each stage of our progress, and extend their seductive influence beyond that stage; because men retain the errors of their infancy, their country, and the age in which they live, long after the truths necessary to the removal of those errors are acknowledged.

In short, there exist, at all times and in all countries, different prejudices, according to the degree of illumination of the different classes of men, and according to their professions. If the prejudices of philosophers be impediments to new acquisitions of truth, those of the less enlightened classes retard the propagation of truths already known, and those of esteemed and powerful professions oppose like obstacles. These are the three kinds of enemies which reason is continually obliged to encounter, and over which she frequently does not triumph till after a long and painful struggle. The history of these contests, together with that of the rise, triumph, and fall of prejudice, will occupy a considerable place in this work, and will by no means form the least important or least useful part of it.

If there be really such an art as that of foreseeing the future improvement of the human race, and of directing and hastening that improvement, the history of the progress it has already made must form the principal basis of this art. Philosophy, no doubt, ought to proscribe the superstitious idea, which supposes no rules of conduct are to be found but in the history of past ages, and no truths but in the study of the opinions of antiquity. But ought it not to include in the proscription the prejudice that would proudly reject the lessons of experience? Certainly it is meditation alone that can by happy combinations, conduct us to the general principles of the science of man. But if the study of individuals of the human species be of use to the metaphysician and moralist, why should that of societies be less useful to them? And why not of use to the political philosopher? If it be advantageous to observe the societies that exist at one and the same period, and to trace their connection and resemblance, why not to observe them in a succession of periods? Even supposing that such observation

might be neglected in the investigation of speculative truths, ought it to be neglected when the question is to apply those truths to practice, and to deduce from science the art that should be the useful result? Do not our prejudices, and the evils that are the consequence of them, derive their source from the prejudices of our ancestors? And will it not be the surest way of undeceiving us respecting the one, and of preventing the other, to develop their origin and effects?

Are we not arrived at the point when there is no longer anything to fear, either from new errors, or the return of old ones; when no corrupt institution can be introduced by hypocrisy, and adopted by ignorance or enthusiasm, when no vicious combination can affect the infelicity of a great people? Accordingly would it not be of advantage to know how nations have been deceived, corrupted, and plunged in misery?

Everything tells us that we are approaching the era of one of the grand revolutions of the human race. What can better enlighten us as to what we may expect, what can be a surer guide to us, amidst its commotions, than the picture of the revolutions that have preceded and prepared the way for it? The present state of knowledge assures us that it will be happy. But is it not upon condition that we know how to assist it with all our strength? And, that the happiness it promises may be less dearly bought, that it may spread with more rapidity over a greater space, that it may be more complete in its effects, is it not requisite to study, in the history of the human mind, what obstacles remain to be feared, and by what means those obstacles are to be surmounted?