A Treatise on Man

Claude-Adrien Helvétlus

Very much a proponent of the self-interest school was Helvétius (1715-1771), one of the most outspoken of the French philosophes. His discussion of the centrality of pleasure and pain in his A Treatise on Man: His Intellectual Faculties and His Education, published the year after he died, would greatly influence Jeremy Bentham and the Utilitarian school in general.

What is here said will be sufficient to convince the discerning reader, that every idea and every judgment may be reduced to a sensation. It would be therefore unnecessary, in order to explain the different operations of the mind, to admit a faculty of judging and comparing distinct from the faculty of sensation. But what, it may be asked, is the principle or motive that makes us compare objects with each other, and gives us the necessary attention to observe their relations? Interest, which is in like manner, as I am going to show, an effect of corporeal sensibility....

All comparison of objects with each other supposes attention, all attention a trouble, and all trouble a motive for exerting it. If there could exist a man without desire, he would not compare any objects, or pronounce any judgment; but he might still judge of the immediate impressions of objects on himself, supposing their impressions to be strong. Their strength becoming a motive to attention, would carry with it a judgment. It would not be the same if the sensation were weak; he would then have no knowledge or remembrance of the judgment it had occasioned. A man surrounded by an infinity of objects, must necessarily be affected by an infinity of sensations, and consequently form an infinity of judgments; but he forms them unknown to himself. Why? Because these judgments are of the same nature with the sensations. If they make an impression that is effaced as soon as made, the judgments formed on these impressions are of the same sort; they leave no remembrance. There is in fact no man who does not, without perceiving it, make every day an infinity of reasonings, of which he is not conscious. I will take, for example, those that attend almost all the rapid motions of our bodies....

It results from the contents of this chapter, that all judgments formed by comparing objects with each other, suppose an interest in us to compare them. Now that interest, necessarily founded on our love of happiness, cannot be anything else than the effect of bodily sensibility; because there all our pleasures, and all our pains have their source. This question being discussed, I conclude

that corporeal pains and pleasures are the unknown principles of all human actions.

ACTION

It is to clothe himself and adorn his mistress, or his wife, to procure them amusements, to support himself and his family, in a word to enjoy the pleasures attached to the gratification of bodily desires that the artisan and the peasant thinks, contrives, and labors. Corporeal sensibility is therefore the sole mover of man, he is consequently susceptible, as I am going to prove, but of two sorts of pleasures and pains, the one are present bodily pains and pleasures, the other are the pains and pleasures of foresight or memory.

PAIN

I know but two sorts of pain, that which we feel, and that which we foresee. I die of hunger; I feel a present pain. I foresee that I shall soon die of hunger. I feel a pain by foresight, the strength of whose impression is in proportion to the proximity and severity of the pain. The criminal who is going to the scaffold, feels yet no torment, but the foresight that constitutes his present punishment, is begun.

REMORSE

Remorse is nothing more than a foresight of bodily pain, to which some crime has exposed us: and is consequently the effect of bodily sensibility. We tremble at the description of the flames, the wheels, the fiery scourges, which the heated imagination of the painter or the poet represents. Is a man without fear, and above the law? He feels no remorse from the commission of a wicked action; provided, however, that he have not previously contracted a virtuous habit; for then he will not pursue a contrary conduct, without feeling an uneasiness, a secret inquietude, to which is also given the name of remorse. Experience tells us, that every action which does not expose us to legal punishment, or to dishonor, is an action, performed in general without remorse. Solon and Plato loved women and even boys, and avowed it. Theft was not punished in Sparta: and the Lacedaemonians robbed without remorse. The princes of the East can, with impunity, load their subjects with taxes, and they do it effectually. The inquisitor can with impunity burn any person who does not think as he does, on certain metaphysical points, and it is without remorse that he gluts his vengeance by hideous torments, for the slight offense that is given to his vanity by the contradiction of a Jew or an Infidel. Remorse, therefore, owes its existence to the fear of punishment or of shame, which is always reducible, as I have already said to a bodily sensation.

FRIENDSHIP

From bodily sensibility flow in like manner, the tears that bathe the urn of my friend. I lament the loss of the man whose conversation relieved me from disquietude, from that disagreeable sensation of the soul, which actually produces bodily pain: I deplore him who exposed his life and fortune to save me from sorrow and destruction; who was incessantly employed in promoting my felicity, and increasing it by every sort of pleasure. When a man enters into himself, when he examines the bottom of his soul, he perceives nothing in all these sentiments but the development of bodily pain and pleasure. What cannot this pain produce? It is by this medium that the magistrate enchains vice, and disarms the assassin.

PLEASURE

There are two sorts of pleasures, as there are two sorts of pains: the one is the present bodily pleasure, the other is that of foresight. Does a man love fine slaves and beautiful paintings? If he discovers a treasure he is transported. He does not, however, yet feel any bodily pleasure, you will say. It is true; but he gains at that moment, the means of procuring the objects of his desires. Now this foresight of an approaching pleasure, is in fact an actual pleasure: for without the love of fine slaves and paintings, he would have been entirely unconcerned at the discovery of the treasure.

The pleasures of foresight, therefore, constantly suppose the existence of the pleasures of the senses. It is the hopes of enjoying my mistress to-morrow that makes me happy to-day. Foresight or memory converts into an actual enjoyment the acquisition of every means proper to procure pleasure. From what motive in fact, do I feel an agreeable sensation every time I obtain a new degree of esteem, of importance, riches, and above all, of power? It is because I esteem power as the most sure means of increasing my happiness.

POWER

Men love themselves: they all desire to be happy, and think their happiness would be complete, if they were invested with a degree of power sufficient to procure them every sort of pleasure. The love of power therefore takes its source from the love of pleasure.

Suppose a man absolutely insensible. But, it will be said, he must then be without ideas, and consequently a mere statue. Be it so: but allow that he may exist, and even think. Of what consequence would the scepter of a monarch be to him? None. In fact, what could the most immense power add to the felicity of a man without feeling.

If power be so coveted by the ambitious, it is as the means of acquiring pleasure.

Power is like gold, a money. The effect of power, and of a bill of exchange is the same. If I be in possession of such a bill, I receive at London or Paris a hundred thousand crowns, and consequently all the pleasures that sum can procure. Am I in possession of a letter of authority or command? I draw in like manner from my fellow-citizens, a like quantity of provisions or pleasures. The effects of riches and power are in a manner the same: for riches are power....

The general conclusion of this chapter, is, that in man all is sensation: a truth of which I shall give a fresh proof, by showing that his sociability is nothing more than a consequence of the same sensations.

OF SOCIABILITY

Man is by nature a devourer of fruits and of flesh; but he is weak, unarmed, and consequently exposed to the voracity of animals stronger than himself. Man, therefore, to avoid the fury of the tiger and the lion, was forced to unite with man. The object of this union was to attack and kill other animals, either to feed on them, or to prevent their consuming the fruits and herbs that served him for nourishment. In the meantime mankind multiplied, and to support themselves, they were obliged to cultivate the earth; but to induce them to this, it became necessary to stipulate, that the harvest should belong to the husbandman. For this purpose the inhabitants made agreements or laws among themselves. These laws strengthened the bonds of a union, that, founded on their wants, was the immediate effect of corporeal sensibility. But cannot this sociability be regarded as an innate quality, a species of amiable morality? All that we learn from experience on this head, is, that in man, as in other animals, sociability is the effect of want. If the desire of defending themselves makes the grazing animals as horses, bulls, &c. assemble in herds; that of chasing, attacking, and conquering their prey, forms in like manner a society of carnivorous animals, such as foxes and wolves.

Interest and want are the principles of all sociability. It is, therefore, these principles alone (of which few writers have given clear ideas) that unite men among themselves: and the force of their union is always in proportion to that of habit and want. From the moment the young savage, or the young bear, is able to provide for his nourishment and his defense, the one quits the hut, and the other the den of his parents. The eagle, in like manner, drives away her young ones from the nest, the moment they have sufficient strength to dart upon their prey, and live without her aid.

The bond that attaches children to their parents, and parents to their children, is less strong than is commonly imagined. A too great strength in this bond would be even fatal to societies. The first regard of a citizen should be for the laws, and the public prosperity; I speak it with regret, filial affection should be in man subordinate to the love of patriotism. If this last affection do not take place of all others, where shall we find a measure of virtue and vice? It would

then be no more, and all morality would be abolished.

For what reason, in fact, has justice and the love of God been recommended to men, above all things? On account of the danger to which a too great love of their parents would expose them. If the excess of this passion were sanctioned; if it were declared the principal attachment, a son would then have a right to rob his neighbor, or plunder the public treasury, to supply the wants, and promote the comforts of his father. Every family would form a little nation, and these nations having opposite interests, would be continually at war with each other.

Every writer, who to give us a good opinion of his own heart, founds the sociability of man on any other principle, than that of bodily and habitual wants, deceives weak minds, and gives them a false idea of morality.

Nature, no doubt, designed that gratitude and habit should form in man a sort of gravitation, by which they should be impelled to a love of their parents: but it has also designed that man should have, in the natural desire of independence, a repulsive power, which should diminish the too great force of that gravitation. Thus the daughter joyfully leaves the house of her mother to go to that of her husband; and the son quits with pleasure his native spot, for an employment in India, an office in a distant country, or merely for the pleasure of traveling.

Notwithstanding the pretended force of sentiment, friendship, and habit, mankind change at Paris, every day, the part of the town, their acquaintance and their friends. Do men seek to make dupes? They exaggerate the force of sentiment and friendship, they represent sociability *as an innate affection or principle.* Can they, in reality, forget that there is but one principle of this kind, which is corporeal sensibility? It is to this principle alone, that we owe our self-love, and the powerful love of independence: if men were, as it is said, drawn toward each other by a strong and mutual attraction, would the heavenly Legislator have commanded them to love each other, and to honor their parents? Would he not have left this point to nature, which, without the aid of any law, obliges men to eat and drink when they are hungry and thirsty, to open their eyes to the light, and keep their hands out of the fire.

Travelers do not inform us that the love which mankind bear to their fellows, is so common as pretended. The sailor, escaped from a wreck, and cast on an unknown coast, does not run with open arms to embrace the first man he meets. On the contrary, he hides himself in a thicket, where he observes the manners of the inhabitants, and then presents himself trembling before them.

But if a European vessel chance to approach an unknown island, do not the savages, it is said, run in crowds towards the ship? They are, without doubt, amazed at the sight, they are struck with the novelty of our dress, our arms and implements. The appearance excites their curiosity. But what desire succeeds to this first sensation? That of possessing the objects of their admiration. They become less gay and more thought-fill; are busied in contriving means to obtain, by force or fraud, the objects of their desires: for that purpose they watch the favorable opportunity to rob, plunder, and massacre the Europeans, who, in

their conquests of Mexico and Peru, gave them early examples of similar injustice and cruelty.

The conclusion of this chapter is, that the principles of morality and politics, like those of all other sciences, ought to be established on a great number of facts and observations. Now, what is the result of the observations hitherto made on morality? That the love of men for their brethren is the effect of the necessity of mutual assistance, and of an affinity of wants, dependent on that corporeal sensibility, which I regard as the principle of our actions, our virtues, and our vices....

OF THE GOODNESS OF MAN IN THE CRADLE

I love you, O my fellow citizens! and my chief desire is to be useful to you. I doubtless desire your approbation; but shall I owe your esteem and applause to a lie? A thousand others will deceive you; I shall not be their accomplice. Some will say you are good, and flatter the desire you have to think yourselves so: believe them not. Others will say you are wicked, and in like manner will say false. You are neither the one nor the other.

No individual is born good or bad. Men are the one or the other, according as a similar or opposite interest unites or divides them. Philosophers suppose men to be born in a state of war. A common desire to possess the same things arms them from the cradle, say they, against each other.

The state of war, without doubt, closely follows the instant of their birth. The peace between them is of short duration. They are not however both enemies. Goodness or badness is an incident to them; it is the consequence of their good or bad laws. What we call in man his goodness or moral sense, is his benevolence to others; and that benevolence is always proportionate to the utility they are of to him. I prefer my countrymen to strangers, and my friends to my countrymen. The prosperity of my friend is reflected on me. If he becomes more rich and powerful, I participate in his riches and power. Benevolence to others is therefore the effect of love for ourselves. Now if self-love, as I have proved in the fourth section, be the necessary effect of the faculty of sensation our love for others, whatever the Shaftesburians may say, is in like manner the effect of the same faculty.

What in fact is that original goodness or moral sense, so much boasted of by the English? What clear idea can we form of such a sense and on what fact do we found its existence? On the goodness of men? But there are also persons who are envious and liars, omnis homo *mendax.* Will they say in consequence, that those men have in them an immoral sense of envy, and a lying sense. Nothing is more absurd than this theological philosophy of Shaftesbury; and yet the greatest part of the English are as fond of it as the French were formerly of their

music. It is not the same with other nations. No stranger can understand the one or bear the other. It is a web on the eye of the English. It must be taken away before they can see clearly.

According to their philosophy, the man indifferent and seated at his ease, desires the happiness of others: but as being indifferent, he does not, and cannot desire any thing. The states of desire and indifference are contradictory. Perhaps the state of perfect indifference is even impossible. Experience teaches us that man is born neither good nor bad: that his happiness is not necessarily connected with the misery of others: that on the contrary, from a good education, the idea of my own happiness will be always more or less closely connected in my memory with that of my fellow-citizens; and that the desire of the one will produce in me the desire of the other: whence it follows, that the love of his neighbor is in every individual the effect of the love of himself. The most clamorous declaimers for original goodness have not moreover been always the greatest benefactors to humanity.

When the welfare of England was at stake, the idle Shaftesbury, that ardent apostle of the beauty of morality, would not, we are told, even go to the parliament-house to save it. It was not the sense of the beauty of morality, but the love of glory and of their country that formed Horatius Cocles, Brutus, and Scaevola. The English philosophers will in vain tell me that beauty of morality is a sense that is developed with the human fetus, and in a certain time, renders man compassionate to the misfortune of his brethren. I can form an idea of my five senses, and of the organs by which they are produced; but I confess I have no more idea of a moral sense, than of a moral castle and elephant.

How long will men continue to use words that are void of meaning, and that not conveying any clear and determinate idea, ought to be forever banished to the schools of theology. Do they mean by this moral sense that sentiment of compassion felt at the sight of an unhappy object? But to compassionate another man's miseries, we must first know what he suffers, and for that purpose must have felt pain. A compassion on report supposes also a knowledge of misery. Which are the evils moreover that in general we are most sensible of? Those which we suffer with the most impatience, and the remembrance of which is consequently the most habitually present to us. Compassion therefore is not an innate sentiment.

What do I feel at the presence of an unhappy person? A strong emotion. What produces it? The remembrance of pains to which men are subject, and to which I myself am exposed: such an idea troubles me, makes me uneasy, and as long as the unfortunate person is present I am afflicted. When I have assisted him, and see him no more, a calm takes place insensibly in my mind; for in proportion as he is distant from me, the remembrance of the miseries that his presence recalled, insensibly vanishes: when therefore I was afflicted at his presence, it was for myself I was afflicted. Which in fact are the evils I commiserate most. They are, as I have already said, not only those I have felt, but those I may still feel: those evils being most present to my memory, strike me most forcibly. My affliction

for the miseries of an unhappy person, is always in proportion to the fear I have of being afflicted with the same miseries. I would, if it were possible, destroy in him the very root of his misfortune, and thereby free myself at the same time from the fear of suffering in the same manner. The love of others is therefore never anything else in man than an effect of the love of himself, and consequently of his corporeal sensibility. In vain does M. Rousseau repeat incessantly *that all men are good, and all the first movements of nature right.* The necessity of laws proves the contrary. What does this necessity imply? That the different interests of men render them good or bad; and that the only method to form virtuous citizens, is to unite the interest of the individual with that of the public....

A proof that humanity is nothing more in man than the effect of the misfortunes he has known either by himself or by others is, that of all the ways to render him humane and compassionate, the most efficacious is to habituate him from his most tender age to put himself in the place of the miserable. Some have in consequence treated compassion as a weakness: let him call it so if they please; this weakness will always be in my eyes the first of virtues, because it always contributes the most to the happiness of humanity.

I have proved that compassion is not either a moral sense, or an innate sentiment, but the pure effect of self-love. What follows? That it is this same love, differently modified, according to the different education we receive, and the circumstances, and situations in which chance has placed us, which renders us humane or obdurate: that man is not born compassionate, but that all may and will become so when the laws, the form of government, and their education lead them to it.

O! you, to whom heaven has entrusted the legislative power, let your administration be gentle, your laws sagacious, and you will have subjects humane, valiant, and virtuous! But if you alter either those laws, or that wise administration, those virtuous citizens will expire without posterity, and you will be surrounded by wicked men only; for the laws will make them such. Man, by nature indifferent to evil, will not give himself up to it without a motive: the happy man is humane; he is the couching lion.

Unhappy is the prince who confides in the original goodness of characters; M. Rousseau supposes its existence; experience denies it: whoever consults that, will learn that the child kills flies, beats his dog, and strangles his sparrow; that the child, born without any humanity, has all the vices of the man.

The man in power is often unjust; the sturdy child is the same: when he is not restrained by the presence of his master, he appropriates by force, like the man in power, the sweetmeat or plaything of his companion. He does that for a coral or a doll which he would do at a mature age for a title or a scepter. The uniformity in the manner of acting at those two ages made M. de la Mothe say, *It is because the child is already a man, that the man is still a child.*

The original goodness of characters cannot be maintained by any argument. I will even add, that in man, goodness and humanity cannot be the work of nature, but of education only.