PART III

Of the Foundation of our Judgments concerning our own Sentiments and Conduct, and of the Sense of Duty Consisting of One Section

Chap. III (continued)

Of the Influences and Authority of Conscience

In such paroxysms of distress, if I may be allowed to call them so, the wisest and firmest man, in order to preserve his equanimity, is obliged, I imagine, to make a considerable, and even a painful exertion. His own natural feeling of his own distress, his own natural view of his own situation, presses hard upon him, and he cannot, without a very great effort, fix his attention upon that of the impartial spectator. Both views present themselves to him at the same time. His sense of honour, his regard to his own dignity, directs him to fix his whole attention upon the one view. His natural, his untaught and undisciplined feelings, are continually calling it off to the other. He does not, in this case, perfectly identify himself with the ideal man within the breast, he does not become himself the impartial spectator of his own conduct. The different views of both characters exist in his mind separate and distinct from one another, and each directing him to a behaviour different from that to which the other directs him. When he follows that view which honour and dignity point out to him, Nature does not, indeed, leave him without a recompense. He enjoys his own complete self-approbation, and the applause of every candid and impartial spectator. By her unalterable laws, however, he still suffers; and the recompense which she bestows, though very considerable, is not sufficient completely to compensate the sufferings which those laws inflict. Neither is it fit that it should. If it did completely compensate them, he could, from self-interest, have no motive for avoiding an accident which must necessarily diminish his utility both to himself and to society; and Nature, from her parental care of both, meant that he should anxiously avoid all such accidents. He suffers, therefore, and though, in the agony of the paroxysm, he maintains, not only the manhood of his countenance, but the sedateness and sobriety of his judgment, it requires his utmost and most fatiguing exertions, to do so.

By the constitution of human nature, however, agony can never be permanent; and, if he survives the paroxysm, he soon comes, without any effort, to enjoy his ordinary tranquillity. A man with a wooden leg suffers, no doubt, and foresees that he must continue to suffer during the reminder of his life, a very considerable inconveniency. He soon comes to view it, however, exactly as every impartial spectator views it; as an inconveniency under which he can enjoy all the ordinary pleasures both of solitude and of society. He soon identifies himself with the ideal man within the breast, he soon becomes himself the impartial spectator of his own situation. He no longer weeps, he no longer laments, he no longer grieves over it, as a weak man may sometimes do in the beginning. The view of the impartial spectator becomes so perfectly habitual to him, that, without any effort, without any exertion, he never thinks of surveying his misfortune in any other view.

The never-failing certainty with which all men, sooner or later,
accommodate themselves to whatever becomes their permanent situation, may, perhaps, induce us to think that the Stoics were, at least, thus far very nearly in the right; that, between one permanent situation and another, there was, with regard to real happiness, no essential difference: or that, if there were any difference, it was no more than just sufficient to render some of them the objects of simple choice or preference; but not of any earnest or anxious desire: and others, of simple rejection, as being fit to be set aside or avoided; but not of any earnest or anxious aversion. Happiness consists in tranquillity and enjoyment. Without tranquillity there can be no enjoyment; and where there is perfect tranquillity there is scarce any thing which is not capable of amusing. But in every permanent situation, where there is no expectation of change, the mind of every man, in a longer or shorter time, returns to its natural and usual state of tranquillity. In prosperity, after a certain time, it falls back to that state; in adversity, after a certain time, it rises up to it. In the confinement and solitude of the Bastile, after a certain time, the fashionable and frivolous Count de Lauzun recovered tranquillity enough to be capable of amusing himself with feeding a spider. A mind better furnished would, perhaps, have both sooner recovered its tranquillity, and sooner found, in its own thoughts, a much better amusement.

The great source of both the misery and disorders of human life, seems to arise from over-rating the difference between one permanent situation and another. Avarice over-rates the difference between poverty and riches: ambition, that between a private and a public station: vain-glory, that between obscurity and extensive reputation. The person under the influence of any of those extravagant passions, is not only miserable in his actual situation, but is often disposed to disturb the peace of society, in order to arrive at that which he so foolishly admires. The slightest observation, however, might satisfy him, that, in all the ordinary situations of human life, a well-disposed mind may be equally calm, equally cheerful, and equally contented. Some of those situations may, no doubt, deserve to be preferred to others: but none of them can deserve to be pursued with that passionate ardour which drives us to violate the rules either of prudence or of justice; or to corrupt the future tranquillity of our minds, either by shame from the remembrance of our own folly, or by remorse from the horror of our own injustice. Wherever prudence does not direct, wherever justice does not permit, the attempt to change our situation, the man who does attempt it, plays at the most unequal of all games of hazard, and stakes every thing against scarce any thing. What the favourite of the king of Epirus said to his master, may be applied to men in all the ordinary situations of human life. When the King had recounted to him, in their proper order, all the conquests which he proposed to make, and had come to the last of them; And what does your Majesty propose to do then? said the Favourite. -- I propose then, said the King, to enjoy myself with my friends, and endeavour to be good company over a bottle. -- And what hinders your Majesty from doing so now? replied the Favourite. In the most glittering and exalted situation that our idle fancy can hold out to us, the pleasures from which we propose to derive our real happiness, are almost always the same with those which, in our actual, though humble station, we have at all times at hand, and in our power. Except the frivolous pleasures of vanity and superiority, we may find, in the most humble station, where there is only personal liberty, every other which the most exalted can afford; and the pleasures of vanity and superiority are seldom consistent with perfect tranquillity, the principle and foundation of all real and satisfactory enjoyment. Neither is it always certain that, in the splendid situation which we aim at, those real and satisfactory pleasures can be enjoyed with the same security as in the humble one which we are so very eager to abandon. examine the records of history, recollect what has happened within the circle of your own experience, consider with attention what has been the conduct of almost all the greatly unfortunate, either in private or public life, whom you may have either read of, or heard of, or remember; and you will find that the misfortunes of by far the greater part of them have arisen from their not knowing when they were well, when it was proper for them to sit still and to be contented. The inscription upon the tomb-stone of the man who had endeavoured to mend a tolerable constitution by taking physic; 'I was well, I wished to be better; here I am; may generally be applied with great justness to the distress of disappointed avarice and ambition.
It may be thought a singular, but I believe it to be a just observation, that, in the misfortunes which admit of some remedy, the greater part of men do not either so readily or so universally recover their natural and usual tranquility, as in those which plainly admit of none. In misfortunes of the latter kind, it is chiefly in what may be called the paroxysm, or in the first attack, that we can discover any sensible difference between the sentiments and behaviour of the wise and those of the weak man. In the end, Time, the great and universal comforter, gradually composes the weak man to the same degree of tranquillity which a regard to his own dignity and manhood teaches the wise man to assume in the beginning. The case of the man with the wooden leg is an obvious example of this.

In the irreparable misfortunes occasioned by the death of children, or of friends and relations, even a wise man may for some time indulge himself in some degree of moderated sorrow. An affectionate, but weak woman, is often, upon such occasions, almost perfectly distracted. Time, however, in a longer or shorter period, never fails to compose the weakest woman to the same degree of tranquillity as the strongest man. In all the irreparable calamities which affect himself immediately and directly, a wise man endeavours, from the beginning, to anticipate and to enjoy before-hand, that tranquillity which he foresees the course of a few months, or a few years, will certainly restore to him in the end.

In the misfortunes for which the nature of things admits, or seems to admit, of a remedy, but in which the means of applying that remedy are not within the reach of the sufferer, his vain and fruitless attempts to restore himself to his former situation, his continual anxiety for their success, his repeated disappointments upon their miscarriage, are what chiefly hinder him from resuming his natural tranquility, and frequently render miserable, during the whole of his life, a man to whom a greater misfortune, but which plainly admitted of no remedy, would not have given a fortnight's disturbance. In the fall from royal favour to disgrace, from power to insignificancy, from riches to poverty, from liberty to confinement, from strong health to some lingering, chronic, and perhaps incurable disease, the man who struggles the least, who most easily and readily acquiesces in the fortune which has fallen to him, very soon recovers his usual and natural tranquility, and surveys the most disagreeable circumstances of his actual situation in the same light, or, perhaps, in a much less unfavourable light, than that in which the most indifferent spectator is disposed to survey them. Faction, intrigue, and cabal, disturb the quiet of the unfortunate statesman. extravagant projects, visions of gold mines, interrupt the repose of the ruined bankrupt. The prisoner, who is continually plotting to escape from his confinement, cannot enjoy that careless security which even a prison can afford him. The medicines of the physician are often the greatest torment of the incurable patient. The monk who, in order to comfort Joanna of Castile, upon the death of her husband Philip, told her of a King, who, fourteen years after his decease, had been restored to life again, by the prayers of his afflicted queen, was not likely, by his legendary tale, to restore sedateness to the distempered mind of that unhappy Princess. She endeavoured to repeat the same experiment in hopes of the same success; resisted for a long time the burial of her husband, soon after raised his body from the grave, attended it almost constantly herself, and watched, with all the impatient anxiety of frantic expectation, the happy moment when her wishes were to be gratified by the revival of her beloved Philip.

(3*) Our sensibility to the feelings of others, so far from being inconsistent with the manhood of self-command, is the very principle upon which that manhood is founded. The very same principle or instinct which, in the misfortune of our neighbour, prompts us to compassionate his sorrow; in our own misfortune, prompts us to restrain the abject and miserable lamentations of our own sorrow. The same principle or instinct which, in his prosperity and success, prompts us to congratulate his joy; in our own prosperity and success, prompts us to restrain the levity and intertemporance of our own joy. In both cases, the propriety of our own sentiments and feelings seems to be exactly in proportion to the vivacity and force with which we enter into and conceive his sentiments and feelings.

The man of the most perfect virtue, the man whom we naturally love and revere the most, is he who joins, to the most perfect command of his own
original and selfish feelings, the most exquisite sensibility both to the
original and sympathetic feelings of others. The man who, to all the soft,
the amiable, and the gentle virtues, joins all the great, the awful, and the
respectable, must surely be the natural and proper object of our highest
love and admiration.

The person best fitted by nature for acquiring the former of those two sets
of virtues, is likewise best fitted for acquiring the latter. The man who
feels the most for the joys and sorrows of others, is best fitted for
acquiring the most complete control of his own joys and sorrows. The
man of the most exquisite humanity, is naturally the most capable of
acquiring the highest degree of self-command. He may not, however,
always have acquired it; and it very frequently happens that he has not.
He may have lived too much in ease and tranquillity. He may have never
been exposed to the violence of faction, or to the hardships and hazards
of war. He may have never experienced the insolence of his superiors, the
jealous and malignant envy of his equals, or the pilfering injustice of his
inferiors. When, in an advanced age, some accidental change of fortune
exposes him to all these, they all make too great an impression upon him.
He has the disposition which fits him for acquiring the most perfect self-
command; but he has never had the opportunity of acquiring it. Exercise
and practice have been wanting; and without these no habit can ever be
tolerably established. Hardships, dangers, injuries, misfortunes, are the
only masters under whom we can learn the exercise of this virtue. But
these are all masters to whom nobody willingly puts himself to school.

The situations in which the gentle virtue of humanity can be most happily
cultivated, are by no means the same with those which are best fitted for
forming the austere virtue of self-command. The man who is himself at
ease can best attend to the distress of others. The man who is himself
exposed to hardships is most immediately called upon to attend to, and to
control his own feelings. In the mild sunshine of undisturbed tranquillity,
the calm retirement of undissipated and philosophical leisure, the soft
virtue of humanity flourishes the most, and is capable of the highest
improvement. But, in such situations, the greatest and noblest exertions
of self-command have little exercise. Under the boisterous and stormy
sky of war and faction, of public tumult and confusion, the sturdy
severity of self-command prospers the most, and can be the most
successfully cultivated. But, in such situations, the strongest suggestions
of humanity must frequently be stifled or neglected; and every such
neglect necessarily tends to weaken the principle of humanity. As it may
frequently be the duty of a soldier not to take, so it may sometimes be his
duty not to give quarter; and the humanity of the man who has been
several times under the necessity of submitting to this disagreeable duty,
can scarce fail to suffer a considerable diminution. For his own ease, he
is too apt to learn to make light of the misfortunes which he is so often
under the necessity of occasioning; and the situations which call forth the
noblest exertions of self-command, by imposing the necessity of
violating sometimes the property, and sometimes the life of our
neighbour, always tend to diminish, and too often to extinguish
altogether, that sacred regard to both, which is the foundation of justice
and humanity. It is upon this account, that we so frequently find in the
world men of great humanity who have little self-command, but who are
indolent and irresolute, and easily disheartened, either by difficulty or
danger, from the most honourable pursuits; and, on the contrary men of
the most perfect self-command, whom no difficulty can discourage, no
danger appal, and who are at all times ready for the most daring and
desperate enterprises, but who, at the same time, seem to be hardened
against all sense either of justice or humanity.

In solitude, we are apt to feel too strongly whatever relates to ourselves:
we are apt to over-rate the good offices we may have done, and the
injuries we may have suffered: we are apt to be too much elated by our
own good, and too much dejected by our own bad fortune. The
conversation of a friend brings us to a better, that of a stranger to a still
better temper. The man within the breast, the abstract and ideal spectator
of our sentiments and conduct, requires often to be awakened and put in
mind of his duty, by the presence of the real spectator: and it is always
from that spectator, from whom we can expect the least sympathy and
indulgence, that we are likely to learn the most complete lesson of self-
command.

Are you in adversity? Do not mourn in the darkness of solitude, do not regulate your sorrow according to the indulgent sympathy of your intimate friends; return, as soon as possible, to the day-light of the world and of society. Live with strangers, with those who know nothing, or care nothing about your misfortune; do not even shun the company of enemies; but give yourself the pleasure of mortifying their malignant joy, by making them feel how little you are affected by your calamity, and how much you are above it.

Are you in prosperity? Do not confine the enjoyment of your good fortune to your own house, to the company of your own friends, perhaps of your flatterers, of those who build upon your fortune the hopes of mending their own; frequent those who are independent of you, who can value you only for your character and conduct, and not for your fortune. Neither seek nor shun, neither intrude yourself into nor run away from the society of those who were once your superiors, and who may be hurt at finding you their equal, or, perhaps, even their superior. The impertinence of their pride may, perhaps, render their company too disagreeable: but if it should not, be assured that it is the best company you can possibly keep; and if, by the simplicity of your unassuming demeanour, you can gain their favour and kindness, you may rest satisfied that you are modest enough, and that your head has been in no respect turned by your good fortune.

The propriety of our moral sentiments is never so apt to be corrupted, as when the indulgent and partial spectator is at hand, while the indifferent and impartial one is at a great distance.

Of the conduct of one independent nation towards another, neutral nations are the only indifferent and impartial spectators. But they are placed at so great a distance that they are almost quite out of sight. When two nations are at variance, the citizen of each pays little regard to the sentiments which foreign nations may entertain concerning his conduct. His whole ambition is to obtain the approbation of his own fellow-citizens; and as they are all animated by the same hostile passions which animate himself, he can never please them so much as by enraging and offending their enemies. The partial spectator is at hand: the impartial one at a great distance. In war and negotiation, therefore, the laws of justice are very seldom observed. Truth and fair dealing are almost totally disregarded. Treaties are violated; and the violation, if some advantage is gained by it, sheds scarce any dishonour upon the violator. The ambassador who dupes the minister of a foreign nation, is admired and applauded The just man who disdains either to take or to give any advantage, but who would think it less dishonourable to give than to take one; the man who, in all private transactions, would be the most beloved and the most esteemed; in those public transactions is regarded as a fool and an idiot, who does not understand his business; and he incurs always the contempt, and sometimes even the detestation of his fellow-citizens. In war, not only what are called the laws of nations, are frequently violated, without bringing (among his own fellow-citizens, whose judgments he only regards) any considerable dishonour upon the violator; but those laws themselves are, the greater part of them, laid down with very little regard to the plainest and most obvious rules of justice. That the innocent, though they may have some connexion or dependency upon the guilty (which, perhaps, they themselves cannot help), should not, upon that account, suffer or be punished for the guilty, is one of the plainest and most obvious rules of justice. In the most unjust war, however, it is commonly the sovereign or the rulers only who are guilty. The subjects are almost always perfectly innocent. Whenever it suits the conveniency of a public enemy, however, the goods of the peaceable citizens are seized both at land and at sea; their lands are laid waste, their houses are burnt, and they themselves, if they presume to make any resistance, are murdered or led into captivity; and all this in the most perfect conformity to what are called the laws of nations.

The animosity of hostile factions, whether civil or ecclesiastical, is often still more furious than that of hostile nations; and their conduct towards one another is often still more atrocious. What may be called the laws of
faction have often been laid down by grave authors with still less regard
to the rules of justice than what are called the laws of nations. The most
ferocious patriot never stated it as a serious question, Whether faith ought
to be kept with public enemies? -- Whether faith ought to be kept with rebels? Whether faith ought to be kept with heretics? are questions which
have been often furiously agitated by celebrated doctors both civil and
ecclesiastical. It is needless to observe, I presume, that both rebels and
heretics are those unlucky persons, who, when things have come to a
certain degree of violence, have the misfortune to be of the weaker party.
In a nation distracted by faction, there are, no doubt, always a few,
though commonly but a very few, who preserve their judgment untainted
by the general contagion. They seldom amount to more than, here and
there, a solitary individual, without any influence, excluded, by his own
candour, from the confidence of either party, and who, though he may be
one of the wisest, is necessarily, upon that very account, one of the most
insignificant men in the society. All such people are held in contempt and
derision, frequently in detestation, by the furious zealots of both parties.
A true party-man hates and despises candour; and, in reality, there is no
vice which could so effectually disqualify him for the trade of a party-
man as that single virtue. The real, revered, and impartial spectator,
therefore, is, upon no occasion, at a greater distance than amidst the
violence and rage of contending parties. To them, it may be said, that
such a spectator scarce exists anywhere in the universe. Even to the great
Judge of the universe, they impute all their own prejudices, and often
view that Divine Being as animated by all their own vindictive and
implacable passions. Of all the corrupters of moral sentiments, therefore,
faction and fanaticism have always been by far the greatest.

Concerning the subject of self-command, I shall only observe further,
that our admiration for the man who, under the heaviest and most
unexpected misfortunes, continues to behave with fortitude and firmness,
always supposes that his sensibility to those misfortunes is very great,
and such as it requires a very great effort to conquer or command. The
man who was altogether insensible to bodily pain, could deserve no
applause from enduring the torture with the most perfect patience and
equanimity. The man who had been created without the natural fear of
death, could claim no merit from preserving his coolness and presence of
mind in the midst of the most dreadful dangers. It is one of the
extravagancies of Seneca, that the Stoical wise man was, in this respect,
superior even to a God; that the security of the God was altogether the
benefit of nature, which had exempted him from suffering; but that the
security of the wise man was his own benefit, and derived altogether
from himself and from his own exertions.

The sensibility of some men, however, to some of the objects which
immediately affect themselves, is sometimes so strong as to render all
self-command impossible. No sense of honour can control the fears of the
man who is weak enough to faint, or to fall into convulsions, upon the
approach of danger. Whether such weakness of nerves, as it has been
called, may not, by gradual exercise and proper discipline, admit of some
cure, may, perhaps, be doubtful. It seems certain that it ought never to be
trusted or employed.