

THE
CONNEXION
BETWEEN
TASTE AND MORALS:

TWO LECTURES

BY

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LECTURE I.

Is the prevalence of a cultivated taste, favorable to morals? Is there a connexion, either in individuals, or in communities, between good taste and good morals?

When I began to reflect upon this point with reference to a public discussion of it, I put the above questions to three educated men, as I happened to meet them. The first said, he had not thought of it, but that, at the first view, he did not believe there was any such connexion; the second said he should wish to see it proved before he would believe it; and the third said, he thought there was such a connexion. This difference of opinion among educated men, led me to think that an investigation of the subject might be a matter of interest, and perhaps of profit. As every thing, in this country, depends upon a sound state of morals in the community, whatever bears upon that, deserves our most careful scrutiny.

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To discuss this subject understandingly, we must know precisely what we are talking about. What then is taste? This term is sometimes used to express mere desire, as a taste for dress, or for low pleasures. It can hardly be necessary to say that that is not the meaning now attached to it. Taste is defined by Alison, to be, "That faculty of the human mind by which we perceive and enjoy whatever is beautiful or sublime in the works of nature or of art." According to this definition, which is sufficiently correct for our present purpose, it will be perceived that there is, first, a perception

of certain qualities in external objects, and then, according to the nature of the object, an emotion of beauty, or of sublimity in the mind. These emotions are, of course, incapable of definition except by stating the occasions on which they arise, and can be known only by being felt. To talk of an emotion to those who have not felt it, is like talking of colors to the blind. And here I may remark, that these terms, beauty and sublimity, have, in common with those denoting sensations, an ambiguity which has often produced confusion. As the term heat is used to denote both the sensation we feel on approaching the fire, and that quality in the fire which produces the sensation, so beauty and sublimity are sometimes used to express the emotions in the mind, and sometimes those qualities in external objects which are fitted to produce them, though there is, of course, in the external object, no emotion, nor any thing resembling one.

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If this account of taste be correct, it will be perceived that it cannot, with any propriety, be compared, as it often has been, to a bodily sense. The impression upon a bodily sense, necessarily follows the presence of the object, and is uniform in all mankind. A tree clothed in fresh foliage is necessarily seen, and seen to be green by all who turn their eyes upon it. The same tree, when seen, may be pronounced by one individual to be beautiful, by another, from some peculiar association, to be the reverse, and by a third, however beautiful in itself, it may be looked upon without any emotion at all. It is, therefore, a great mistake to suppose, as many do, that those qualities in objects which awaken the emotions of taste, act directly and necessarily upon us, like those which affect the senses.

A second preliminary inquiry is, What are the causes which produce these emotions? And here I barely remark, without inquiring after any common principle by which they produce similar results, that these causes differ widely from each other. The emotions may be awakened by natural objects, by sound, by the

products of the imagination, by the combinations of the intellect, and by certain manifestations of the affections and moral character.

A third inquiry is, how the taste can be cultivated? This obviously can be done only on two conditions. The first is, that we put ourselves in situations adapted to produce the emotions of taste; and the second is, that we preserve a state of mind that will permit those emotions to arise. This last, a proper state of

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mind, though less often considered, is quite as important as the first. "It is," says the poet,

"The soul that sees; the outward eyes
Present the object, but the mind descries,
And thence delight, disgust, or cool indifference
rise."

Upon him whose mind is engrossed by care, or ruffled by passion, the most beautiful objects make no impression. To perceive and enjoy them, the mind must be calm. The beauties and sublimities of nature are like the stars, which the storm shuts out, but when the heavens are serene, they come out, one after another, to the eye that is watching for them, till the firmament glows with their light. He, therefore, and he only, who, in a proper state of mind, will place himself in the presence of beautiful or sublime objects, and will compare the effects produced under different circumstances, will improve his taste, both in its susceptibility to emotion, and in its power of discrimination.

The question then, which we are now prepared to discuss, is, whether such a cultivation and improvement of the taste, has a favorable effect upon the moral character?

That it has such an effect, I infer, first, because we find in the emotions of taste, to say the least, an innocent source of enjoyment for our leisure hours, and the mind that is innocently happy, is less

accessible to temptation. Indolence, mere vacuity, we all know, is the porch of vice, and the great dangers to the young arise from their leisure hours—from the

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want of some means of innocent mental exhilaration, in which they can be induced to spend those hours. It was said by Franklin, that leisure was a time in which to do something useful; but all are not Franklins. If leisure time can be, as it is by many, usefully employed, so much the better; but he who should provide for our youth the means and the inducements to spend their leisure time innocently, would be a public benefactor. In our cities, where the temptations to mere sensual gratification are so numerous and obtrusive, and where natural objects are very much excluded, this is a point of great importance, and of great difficulty. Until of late very little of this kind has been attempted, unless theatres may be called an attempt. But theatres with us are out of the question, for Miss Martineau says that "the Americans have very little dramatic taste; and that the spirit of puritanism still rises up in such fierce opposition to the stage, as to forbid the hope that this grand means of intellectual exercise will ever be made the instrument of moral good to society there, that it might be made." She says, moreover, so hopeless is our case, that "those who respect dramatic entertainments the most highly, will be the most anxious that the American theatres should be closed." Theatres are indeed out of the question, and I trust it will be a long time before we shall make progress backwards, to that state of morals which is produced by the instructions even of an English theatre.

It is in view of the want now under consideration, that the establishment of Associations for literary

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purposes, and for procuring popular lectures open to all, is not only a new, but a most promising feature in the history of our cities.

Man needs, and must have, excitement and mental exhilaration, and our Creator, if we would but see it, has not been inattentive to this want of our frame. No; to supply it, we have the pleasures of rational social converse, the play of the affections, the duties of kindness and benevolence—does a man feel depressed, let him do a good action—and last, but not least, the gratifications of taste: all the pleasure to be derived from the concord of sweet sounds, from the charms of literature, from the forms and colors and groupings of nature, from her sunrisings and sunsettings, from her landscapes of mountain and valley and lake and river, from the stars that roll in their courses, and the flowers that nod to each other by the way-side.—These are the sources of mental exhilaration which God has provided; and they are, to the artificial stimulants of theatrical exhibitions and of gambling, what the cold water that was drunk in Eden is to brandy and gin. May I not here venture to say to young men, 'Beware how you spend your *leisure* hours! your character and destiny in life will probably turn upon it.' Among the means, as I have already said, of spending these hours at least innocently, the gratifications of taste are conspicuous. They seem for this very purpose to have been had distinctly in view in the fitting up of this world; and so far as they lure the mind from the lower gratifications of sense, they must be favorable to morals.

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The remarks now made respect taste chiefly as a guard against evil; but I cannot dismiss this head without noticing more fully its positive influence, as a source of innocent enjoyment, upon morals. A good taste, and I do not hold myself answerable for its perversions, involves a ready susceptibility to the emotions of beauty and sublimity, and of course a readiness to receive pleasure from the common appearances of nature, and from every free and natural expression of good feeling. It is, in my view, of the first importance both to character and to happiness, that the young should cultivate a relish for those simple and natural pleasures, the sources of which are open to all. It is important to happiness. How

much happiness does the young florist secure, who can look upon the common violet as it opens its eye from under the snows of the early spring, with much the same pleasure as upon the choice exotic which is resorted to and exclusively admired by those who have unfortunately been taught that it is vulgar to admire what is common! How much happiness does he secure who is touched by a beautiful action wherever he sees it, who appreciates sympathy wherever he finds it, and however expressed! A mind rightly constituted in this respect, drinks in enjoyment from the objects and occurrences of daily life, as the eye does light. It is also essential to character. How many young men enter life with a false estimate of the advantages which wealth and fashion can confer; who find their happiness, not in the contemplation and pursuit of appropriate objects, but in what others think of them, and to whom the world becomes insipid unless *they*

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make a figure in it! Let now misfortune come upon such men, and the world fails them. *Their* world is gone; they have no resource; they become, generally dishonest, sometimes inefficient and gloomy, and commit suicide. These persons come to consider the common and truly great blessings which God has given as nothing unless they may possess those artificial and egotistical enjoyments which arise from conventional society. They see not the splendid ornaments and rich provisions which, to adopt, with a slight accommodation, the beautiful language of another, are gathered round the earth for them;—"its ocean of air above, its ocean of water beneath, its zodiac of lights, its tent of dropping clouds, its striped coat of climates, its fourfold year." It is nothing to them, if they have not man for their servant, that "all the parts of nature incessantly work into each other's hands for their profit; that the wind sows the seed, the sun evaporates the sea, the wind blows the vapor to the field, the ice on the other side of the planet condenses the rain on this, and thus the endless circulations of the divine charity nourish man." What a change when such a person is

brought back to a true relish of the simple pleasures of nature! Even sickness, depriving him for a time of what he had undervalued, if it bring him back to this, is a blessing; and then the result may be stated in the words of Gray:—

"See the wretch who long has
tost
On the thorny bed of pain,
At length regain his vigor lost,
And breathe and walk again."
Then,

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"The meanest flow'ret of the vale,
The simplest note that swells the
gale,
The common sun, the air, the skies,
To him are opening paradise!"
Then, though he may hold little property by that title which the law gives, he yet feels that the universe is his for those nobler purposes for which it was intended to act on the spirit:

"His are the mountains, and the valleys
his,
And the resplendent rivers;"
and he looks back upon his former discontent as the petulance of a child. The simple beauties and the glad voices of nature have made him a man again.

But again, I infer that there is a connexion between good taste and good morals, because there is an analogy between those qualities in matter which excite the emotions of taste, and those relations on which morals depend. So much is this the case, that some philosophers found morality upon a theory of the beautiful, considering it a sublime harmony. In all beautiful objects in nature, or in art, there is an order, a propriety, a fitness, a proportion; and

the impression which these make upon us is so analogous to that which is made by virtuous conduct, that we use the same terms to express both. To me, indeed, it seems that beauty in matter is to moral beauty what instinct is to reason, or what the light of the moon is to that of the sun; containing some of the same elements, but destitute of the highest. Hence,

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as we should naturally expect, morals furnish that region in the province of taste in which she gathers those flowers that are richest in beauty and sweetest in perfume.

"Is aught so fair,
In all the dewy landscape of the
spring,
In the bright eye of Hesper, or the
morn,
In nature's fairest forms, is aught so
fair
As virtuous friendship?"

But I observe again, that as there is the analogy just pointed out between their causes, so there is an affinity between the emotions themselves of taste and correct moral feeling, and the transition from one to the other is obvious. This point requires illustration. That our emotions are associated in groups, is practically known to every body. Even the child does not ask his father for a sixpence when he is in an ill temper, because he knows the transition is not easy from ill temper to generosity. Deep grief cannot pass at once to sudden joy. It must be by a gradual transition, first to a tender melancholy, and then to cheerfulness, and then to joy. "The garment of sorrow," as Coleridge expresses it, "must be drawn off so gradually, and that to be put in its stead so gradually slipt on and feel so like the former, that the sufferer shall be sensible of the change only by the refreshment." It is by understanding well these affinities of the feelings that the orator can continue to control

them as they pass over their widest range. The necessity of a suitable state of mind in order that the emotions of taste may arise, has already

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been noticed, and what I now observe is, that a state of correct moral feeling is more favorable to these emotions than any other. There is between them such an affinity that they readily associate with each other; while there is, between the emotions of taste and a vicious state of mind, no such affinity, but they are to a great extent incompatible.

The external world often gives back to us but the image of our own thoughts, and hence may seem almost as variable as the dim forms of twilight to which the imagination gives its own shape. This tendency of the mind to cast its own hue over nature, or rather to receive different emotions from external objects, according to its own state, is well illustrated by Crabbe, in his tale called "The Lover's Journey." In this tale, Orlando, the lover, starts on a pleasant morning with the expectation of finding the object of his affections at a village, where she had agreed to meet him. The first part of his journey lay across a heath covered with furze. But hear him:—

"Men may say
A heath is barren; nothing is so gay;
Barren or bare to call this charming scene
Argues a mind possessed by care or
spleen."

And thus he went on, admiring the wholesome wormwood and the vigorous brier, till he reached the village, and then disappointment came. The lady had gone to a village some miles further on, under circumstances that vexed him, and led him to doubt her affection. He doubted even whether he should proceed, but at length determined to see and

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upbraid her. Now hear him again, as he passes along by the side of a beautiful river:—

"I hate these scenes, Orlando angry cried;
And these proud farmers, yes, I hate their
pride;
See that sleek fellow, how he stalks along,
Strong as an ox, and ignorant as strong.
These deep, fat meadows I detest; it shocks
One's feelings there to see the grazing ox;—
For slaughter fatted—as a lady's smile
Rejoices man, and means his death the
while."

And if mere disappointment, without a consciousness of guilt and remorse, could produce such effects, what must we expect when the mind is not at peace with itself? Tendencies are shown by extreme cases, and it is in perfect consistency with the nature of things that Milton makes Satan exclaim, on seeing Eden in its united innocence and beauty,

"O hell! what do mine eyes with grief behold!"

Who can imagine a miser, even, to say nothing of a thief, or a drunkard, lifting his eyes from his buried heaps, and enjoying the scene before him, however beautiful? While he who performs a deed of charity at the end of his walk, will find nature wearing a richer dress on his return. The mind conscious of rectitude is at peace with itself, and is in that calm state which permits it to enjoy whatever is pleasing.

But not only, as in the cases now mentioned, is a right state of moral feeling favorable to taste, but the emotions of taste also tend to introduce moral ideas and emotions. It is, as I conceive, chiefly from this fact that nature has a tendency to lead the mind

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"up to nature's God;" for we must all be conscious that when we view nature as beautiful or sublime, this tendency is strongest. No one can have stood by Niagara, or upon the White Mountains, without feeling this. Hence the groves and the high hills were the first places of worship. Hence the Indian sacrifices to the Great Spirit when he passes through the wild rapids. And as we associate the beauties of nature with the wisdom and goodness of God, so do we, in many cases, instinctively infer from the displays of taste in man, something of his moral character. Who, for example, in travelling through a solitary forest, if he should come, as there are many such, to a neat log-house, with a trellised woodbine at the door, and with every thing orderly and clean about it, would not expect to pass by unmolested, or, if he should call, to be civilly and kindly treated?—whereas, if every thing bore the appearance of filth and dilapidation, and the only signs of taste were those which indicated a taste for rum, he might well quicken his pace for fear he should be waylaid. No one expects to find indications of taste about the dwelling of a drunkard, or of one abandoned to any low vice. I appeal to any one who hears me, whether he has not felt that it was an indication of a good moral character, and an encouragement to charity, when he has entered some poor dwelling and found that there was still kept alive, in the midst of poverty, a susceptibility to the emotions, and a regard to the requisitions of taste.

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I have just observed, that there is an affinity between correct moral feeling and the emotions of taste. I now observe, that the highest pleasures of taste cannot be enjoyed without correct views on great moral subjects, and especially respecting the being and attributes of God. Whatever may be said of the power of material objects, in themselves considered, to produce the emotions of taste, it is certain that their chief power depends on the conceptions of the mind which they awaken as signs. A single instance will illustrate

this. Most of us have probably felt the emotion of sublimity on hearing what we supposed to be distant thunder, which vanished, and perhaps seemed ridiculous, the moment we ascertained that the sound was produced by the rumbling of a cart. In this case, it is obvious that the emotion depended, not on the sound itself, but on the conception of the mind awakened by it. Now this is pre-eminently the case in the works of nature. How different must be the emotions awakened by a view of the evening firmament in the mind of him who should suppose the stars to be mere points of light, set at no great distance above him, and moving around the earth solely for the convenience of man, from those awakened in the mind of him to whom those points of light indicate the existence of an infinite space; and of suns, and worlds, and systems without number, and at distances which cause the wing of the strongest imagination to flag! How different the emotions produced by the comet now,

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as it returns at its predicted period, from those excited as it fired

"the length of Ophiucus huge
In the Arctic sky, and, from his horrid
hair,"

was supposed to shake "pestilence and war!" As, therefore, he who cannot see beyond the stars as they appear to the sense, must lose by far the highest pleasure which they are adapted as objects of taste to give; so he who knows the physical structure of the universe, and who yet does not see in it, and behind it, an infinite and beneficent Intelligence, cannot have connected with his view those conceptions which awaken the highest emotions of beauty and sublimity.

The relations of man to nature are much less intimate than those of God, and yet our emotions in view of nature are greatly modified by the view which we take of *His* dignity and moral character. It

was when Hamlet supposed there was foul corruption and a general want of principle in society, that "this goodly frame, the earth," seemed to him but "a steril promontory;" "this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament," why, it appeared no other thing to him "than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors." It was when her inhabitants were oppressed and degraded, that the natural beauty, which is still as bright as ever on the shores of Greece, seemed in the eye of the poet but as

"The loveliness in death
That parts not quite with parting breath,
But beauty with that fearful bloom,
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That hue which haunts it to the tomb,
So coldly sweet, so deadly fair,
We start, for life is wanting there."
"'Twas Greece, but living Greece no
more."

We must all have felt that a shade of sadness was cast over the face of nature when we have thought of the passions, and wars, and lust, and rapine of man, in connexion with her quiet scenes. On the other hand, were the moral state of the world what we trust it shall one day be,—did universal purity, and goodness, and love reign,—would not the sun seem to shine with a more benignant radiance; instead of the thorn, would there not come up the fir-tree: would not the mountains and hills break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field clap their hands?

And if the emotions of taste are thus modified by our views of man, how much more must they be by those respecting God! How must a blank atheism hang the heavens in sackcloth, and cover the earth with a pall, and turn the mute promisings of nature into a mockery, and make of her mighty fabric one great charnel-house of death, without the hope of a resurrection! On the other hand,

how must the beauty and sublimity of nature and of the universe be heightened, the moment we perceive them in their connexion with God! Nothing is more common than to hear those, who emerge from that practical atheism in which most men live, speak of the new perceptions of beauty and sublimity with which they look upon the works of nature:—

"In that blest moment, Nature, throwing
wide

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Her veil opaque, discloses, with a smile,
The Author of her beauties, who, retired
Behind his own creation, works unseen
By the *impure*, and hears his power
denied."

All our investigations into nature show that man has no faculties to which there are not corresponding and adequate objects. As infinite as he is in reason, yet the works of God are not exhausted by the operations of that reason. No intellectual Alexander ever sat down and wept for the want of more worlds to conquer. As vast as is his imagination, the revelations of astronomy, as sober facts, go beyond any thing that the imagination had conceived. And is it so, that, in the region of taste alone, the faculties of man have no adequate object? But it is only when nature, like the Bible, is seen to be full of God, that she is clothed with her true sublimity. It is only when "the heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth his handy work," that they correspond to the highest conceptions either of the taste or of the intellect. Man rests in the Infinite alone, and the universe without a God is not in harmony with his constitution, even when he is considered as endowed with taste only. But if our views on moral subjects thus modify the emotions of taste, it cannot be doubted that those emotions react upon our moral views, tending to elevate and purify them.

I remark again, that the emotions of taste are favorable to morals, because they are disinterested. As admiration becomes intense, men forget themselves, and, in proportion as they thus find enjoyment,

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they are prepared for that higher enjoyment which a disinterested performance of duty brings with it. Whenever we see excellence in another, we are bound to admire it without reference to sect or party; and admiration, thus bestowed, is almost always connected with a high moral character. The beauty who can truly forget herself in her admiration for another, deserves admiration for qualities far higher and nobler than beauty.

I only observe further, that a cultivated taste is favorable to morals, because the cultivation of one of our powers has a tendency to strengthen the rest.—This, I know, is disputed, and it is even supposed that the union of certain powers in any high degree is impossible. Thus, it is often supposed that a remarkable memory and a sound judgment do not go together; and it must be confessed that the memory may be so cultivated as not to strengthen the judgment. But when I speak of cultivating a faculty, I mean cultivating it on correct principles and with reference to the end for which it was given. Those who remember events as isolated, or only as they are connected by the relations of time and place, and who do not see and remember them as connected by the relations of cause and effect, means and end, premises and conclusion, do not, by such an exercise of the memory, strengthen the judgment, though they certainly show that it has great need of being strengthened. Of what possible use can it be, to the forming of a correct judgment on any point, for a good woman to remember the precise age of every child in the neighborhood?

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It is these walking chronicles, these living almanacs, who will tell

you the weather for all time past, if not for all time to come, who get the credit of having great memories and little judgment. But such a memory is, to one cultivated on correct principles, only what a room full of minerals and birds and fish and insects and rubbish, promiscuously tumbled together, is to a well-arranged museum. Who does not know that experience is the best enlightener of the judgment?—And where does experience garner her stores but in the memory? It is obvious that he who has the best memory of past events, in their true connexions, will have the best possible materials for forming a judgment of the future. The same opposition is generally supposed to exist between the imagination and the judgment. But it occasionally happens that an individual, like Edmund Burke, unites the most gorgeous imagination with the profoundest judgment; and then it is seen that the analogies which the imagination suggests yield important lights to the judgment instead of misleading it. I know that the imagination, striking its roots into the hotbed of novel-reading, may overtop the judgment; but, judiciously cultivated, I contend that it is not unfavorable to the judgment. And if, in these cases, a judicious cultivation of one power tends to strengthen the other, much more will the cultivation of taste have a favorable tendency upon the moral nature, since these departments of the mind have never been supposed to be in opposition, but are, as we have seen, closely allied to each other.

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But all this time it has probably been objected that, however plausible the reasoning may be on this subject, it is yet contrary to experience. If it were so, it might perhaps be said of it, as was said by Euler of a demonstrated property of the arch, "this is contrary to all experience, but is nevertheless true:"—it is so in the nature of things, but the materials are refractory. But let us see how far it is contrary to experience; or rather, whether we cannot, so far as it is thus contrary, satisfactorily account for it.

In order to this, we must make, as it seems to me, three important distinctions. And, first, we must distinguish between taste

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