

have already shown. An equality of power and a freedom of will cannot exist in a society of a hundred rulers, or even in a decemvirate, a triumvirate, or barely in a divided sovereignty, as the commonwealth of Sparta. The superior ability will constantly draw after it the superior command, and be in effect the sovereign of the state; it matters not under which name, whether emperor, king, consul, protector, stadtholder, or simply tribune or burgo-master.

If that principle I set out with is a truth, viz.: that actual experience deduced from the history of nations is the surest test of the truth or falsehood of any doctrine of politics, it may be no useless task if we endeavor to apply this criterion to some political doctrines which have the support of a great name, and have on that account obtained a pretty general currency.

The author of the "Spirit of Laws," a work which must ever be regarded as the production of a most enlightened mind, has built a great deal of plausible and ingenious reasoning on this general idea, that the three distinct forms of government, the monarchical, the despotic, and the republican, are influenced by three separate principles, upon which the whole system in each form is constructed, and on which it must depend for its support. "The principle of the monarchical form," says Montesquieu, "is honor; of the despotic, fear; and of the republican, virtue:" a position which, if true, would at once determine to which of the three forms the preference ought to be given in speculating on their comparative degrees of merit.

In order to examine this important position, which is the foundation of a most elaborate theory, and from which the author draws conclusions deeply affecting the interests of society, we shall take the example of the *republic*, with the nature and character of which form, we have had some opportunity of being acquainted from the preceding short sketch of the history of the Grecian commonwealths.

The ingenious author of an *Essay on the History of Civil Society** thus enlarges on the idea of M. Montesquieu:—"In democracy," says he, "men must love equality; they must respect the rights of their fellow citizens; they must unite by the common ties of affection to the state. In forming personal pretensions, they must be satisfied with that degree of consideration which they can procure by their abilities fairly measured with those of an opponent. They must labor for the public without hope of profit. They must reject every attempt to create a personal dependence. Candor, force and elevation of mind, in short, are the props of democracy, and virtue is the principle required to its preservation." A beautiful picture—a state indeed of consummate perfection! But the author proceeds:—"How

*Dr. Adam Fergusson.

ardently should mankind wish for the form, if it tended to establish the principle, or were in every instance a sure indication of its presence! But perhaps we must have possessed the principle, in order, with any hopes of advantage, to receive the form." The last sentence is a fair and just conclusion, which needed not the cautious form in which it is expressed. The author plainly intimates his own opinion, in which every thinking mind will agree with him, that this beautiful picture, which he has drawn correctly after the sketch of Montesquieu, is nothing better than an Utopian theory; a splendid chimera, descriptive of a state of society that never did, and never could exist; a republic not of men, but of angels.

For where, it may be asked, was that democracy ever found on earth, where, in the words of this description, men loved equality; were satisfied with the degree of consideration they could procure by their abilities fairly measured with those of an opponent, (a circumstance in itself utterly destructive of equality,) labored for the public without hope of profit, and rejected every attempt to create a personal dependence? Did such a government ever exist, or, while society consists of human beings, is it possible that such ever should exist? While man is a being instigated by the love of power—a passion visible in an infant, and common to us even with the inferior animals—he will seek personal superiority in preference to every matter of a general concern; or at best, he will employ himself in advancing the public good, as the means of individual distinction and elevation: he will promote the interest of the state from the selfish but most useful passion of making himself considerable in that establishment which he labors to aggrandize.

Such is the true picture of man as a political agent. But let us not be understood, that what is here affirmed with regard to the community at large, is strictly true of every member who composes it. If we look in vain for disinterested patriotism in the aggregate of a people, it would be a rash and unjust conclusion to assert that no such virtue exists in the breasts of individuals. The same evidence of history which proves the truth of the one assertion, would suffice to disprove the other. The annals of the Greek and Roman states record examples of the most exalted patriotic virtue in a few distinguished characters, whose names have come down with honor to modern times, and are destined to survive to the latest posterity. But these examples afford in themselves a proof which fully confirms the general proposition. The admiration which those virtuous individuals excited while they lived, the lasting honors that attend their memory, demonstrate the singularity and rareness of that character, the difficulty of its attainment, and thence the distinguished honors which it claims, as approaching as near as possible to the *ideal perfection* of human nature.

Dissenting as I do from the notion of Montesquieu, that virtue is the principle of a democratic government, I am yet ready to allow (what may seem at first view paradoxical) that this form of government is the best adapted to produce, though not the most frequent, yet the most striking, examples of virtue in individuals. But why? Even for a reason the very opposite to the opinion of that ingenious writer. A democratic government opposes more impediments to disinterested patriotism than any other form. To surmount these, a pitch of virtue is necessary which, in other situations, where the obstacles are less great and numerous, is not called into exertion. The nature of a republican government gives to every member of the state an equal right to cherish views of ambition, and to aspire to the highest offices of the commonwealth; it gives to every individual the same title with his fellows to aspire at the government of the whole. Where talents alone are sufficient to obtain weight and distinction, we may look for a display of ambition in all who have a high opinion of their own abilities. The number of candidates excites rivalships, contentions, and factions. The glorious names of liberty and patriotism are always found effectual to rouse and inflame the multitude; rarely indeed to blind them to the real character and views of the demagogue, but ever sufficient to be a mask for their own love of tumult and the hatred of their superiors. In such a state of society, how rare is genuine virtue; how singular the character of a truly disinterested patriot! He appears and he is treated as an imposter; he attempts to serve his country in its councils, or in offices; he is calumniated, reviled, and persecuted; he dies in disgrace or in banishment; and the same envy which maligned him living, embalms him dead, and showers encomiums on his memory, to depress and mortify the few surviving imitators of his virtues. We have seen, from the history of the Grecian states, that a democracy has produced some splendid models of genuine patriotism in the persons of Aristides, Miltiades, and Cimon. We have seen the reward that attended that character under this form of government, of which we are taught to believe that virtue is the principle.

In the science of politics, more than in any other, the greatest caution is necessary in the adoption of general positions. The theory of M. Montesquieu leads, apparently by fair induction, to a variety of consequences most deeply interesting to man, not only in his political, but in his moral capacity. How seriously ought those general propositions to be canvassed and scrutinized, from which their author has deduced such consequences as the following! *That as in a democracy there is no occasion for the principle of honor, so in a monarchy virtue is not at all necessary; that under the latter government the state can subsist independently of the love of country, of the passion of true glory, and of every heroic virtue; that the laws supply the place of those virtues, and*

*the state dispenses with them; that under a monarchy, a virtuous man ought not to hold office; that public employments ought to be venal; * and that crimes, if kept secret, are of no consequence. †* If, instead of theoretical speculation, we take history for our guide, and thence form a fair estimate of the condition of the subject under all the different forms of the political machine, we shall be in no danger of having our reason blinded and abused by such absurd and pernicious chimeras, with whatever sophistry they are disguised to our understanding.

The history of the states of Greece exhibits in its earliest period a very general diffusion of the patriotic spirit, and the love of ingenuous freedom. Those virtuous feelings became gradually corrupted as the nation advanced in power and splendor. Selfish ambition and the desire of rule in the commonwealth came in place of the thirst for national glory; and at length the enthusiasm for freedom, which was at first the glowing character of the Grecian states, gave place to an enthusiasm of another kind, still of an ingenuous nature, though far less worthy in its aim,—an admiration of the fine arts, a passion for the objects of taste, and all those refinements which are the offspring of luxury.

Patriotism always exists in the greatest degree in rude nations, and in an early period of society. Like all other affections and passions, it operates with the greatest force where it meets with the greatest difficulties. It seems to be a virtue which grows from opposition; which subsists in its greatest vigor amidst turbulence and dangers; but in a state of ease and safety, as if wanting its appropriate nourishment, it languishes and decays. We must not then wonder at that difference of patriotic character which distinguished the Greeks in the early ages of their history, from that by which they were known in their more advanced and more luxurious periods. It is a law of nature to which no experience has ever furnished an exception, that the rising grandeur and opulence of a nation must be balanced by the decline of its heroic virtues. When we find in the latter ages of the Grecian history, and in the declension of the Roman commonwealth and subsequent periods of the empire, no traces of that noble spirit of patriotism which excited our respect and admiration when they were infant and narrow establishments, it is not that the race of men had degenerated, or that the same soil and climate which formerly produced heroes could now only rear abject slaves and luxurious tyrants. Nature is still the same; and man comes the same from the hand of nature; but artificial causes have thrown him into that situation which affords no exercise to passions which once had their amplest scope and operation; which banishes virtue by dimin-

* Spirit of Laws, b. viii., c. 9.

† Spirit of Laws, b. iii., c. 5.

ishing its objects and annihilating its most substantial rewards; for wealth and ease and safety deny all exertion to heroic virtue; and in a society marked by these characteristics, such endowment can neither lead to power, to eminence, nor to fame.

Such was the situation of Greece, when, extending her conquests and importing both the wealth and the manners of foreign nations, she lost with her ancient poverty her ancient virtue. Venality and corruption pervaded every department of her states, and became the spring of all public measures, which, instead of tending to the national welfare, had for their only object the gratification of the selfish passions of individuals. Under these circumstances, it was no wonder that she should become an easy prey to a foreign power, which in fact rather purchased her in the market, than subdued her by force of arms.

Yet Greece, thus degenerate and fallen from the proud eminence she once maintained, continued in some respects to hold a distinguished rank among the contemporary nations. Conquered as she was, she continued in one point of view to preserve a high superiority even over the power which had subdued and enslaved her. Her progress in letters and philosophy, and her unrivalled eminence in the arts, compensated in some degree the loss of her national liberties, and forced even from her conquerors an avowal of her superiority in every department of science and mental energy. The victors did not blush to become the scholars of the vanquished. The most eminent of the Roman orators perfected themselves in their art in the school of Athens. The Greek philosophy had for some ages its disciples in Italy; and from the golden era of the administration of Pericles at Athens, the Greeks furnished the models of all that is excellent in the arts of poetry, painting, sculpture, and architecture.

We proceed, therefore, to take a short survey of the attainments of the Greeks in those departments of science and of art, beginning with an account of their extraordinary eminence in sculpture, painting, and architecture, in which they arrived at a pitch of perfection which has been the admiration and envy of all succeeding ages.

CHAPTER VII.

The Greeks not eminent in the Useful Arts—Commerce—Superiority in the Fine Arts—Greek Architecture—Gothic Architecture—Sculpture—Inferiority of the Moderns—Greek religion favorable to Sculpture and Painting—Greek Painters.

It is not among the Greeks that we are to look for the greatest improvement in the useful or the necessary arts of life. When we speak of the eminence of this people in the arts, we are understood to mean those which, by distinction, are termed the fine arts, or those which mark the refinement of a people, and which come in the train of luxury. Agriculture, which deservedly holds the first rank among the useful arts of life, does not appear ever to have attained a remarkable degree of advancement among the Greeks.* At Sparta, this, as well as other arts, being confined to the slaves, it is not there that we are to look for any remarkable progress in those departments. With respect to Attica, the soil of that country was naturally barren: its best produce was the olive; and the Athenians the more readily confined themselves to that branch of husbandry, that it was little, if at all, attended to in any of the other states of Greece. That Attica produced little or no grain is evident from this fact, mentioned by Demosthenes, that the Athenians imported annually 400,000 medimni of corn. The medimnus was somewhat more than four pecks of English measure.

Deficient as the Greeks seem to have been in agriculture, they were not much more considerable as a commercial people. Xenophon, indeed, in his treatise on the Public Revenue, advises his countrymen to spare no pains in advancing their commerce, and lays it down as a sound maxim, that the riches of individuals constitute the strength of a state: but such ideas were repugnant to the common notions of his countrymen, at least in the earlier periods of the republics. The laws of Lycurgus, we have seen, proscribed commerce, with all other arts, as tending to produce an inequality of wealth: nor did the system of Solon give any encouragement to trade. Notwithstanding these impediments, however, from the time when the Greeks had seen and tasted the

* Plato de Legg. l. 7, and Aristotle in his Politic. l. 8, c. 10, both explode the practice of agriculture by the free-born citizens, and confine it to the slaves.