A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful

Burke Edmund
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THE

PREFACE.

I have endeavoured to make this edition something more full and satisfactory than the first. I have sought with the utmost care, and read with equal attention, every thing which has appeared in publick against my opinions; I have taken advantage of the candid liberty of my friends; and if by these means I have been better enabled to discover the imperfections of the work, the indulgence it has received, imperfect as it was, furnished me with a new motive to spare no reasonable pains for its improvement. Though I have not found sufficient reason, or what appeared to me sufficient, for making any material change in my theory, I have found it necessary in many places to explain, illustrate and enforce it. I have prefixed an introductory discourse concerning Taste; it is a matter curious in itself; and it leads naturally enough to the principal
principal enquiry. This with the other explanations has made the work considerably larger; and by increasing its bulk has, I am afraid added to its faults; so that notwithstanding all my attention, it may stand in need of a yet greater share of indulgence than it required at its first appearance.

They who are accustomed to studies of this nature will expect, and they will allow too for many faults. They know that many of the objects of our enquiry are in themselves obscure and intricate; and that many others have been rendered so by affected refinements or false learning; they know that there are many impediments in the subject, in the prejudices of others, and even in our own, that render it a matter of no small difficulty to shew in a clear light the genuine face of nature. They know that whilst the mind is intent on the general scheme of things, some particular parts must be neglected; that we must often submit the style to the matter, and frequently give up the praise of elegance, satisfied with being clear.

The
The characters of nature are legible it is true; but they are not plain enough to enable those who run, to read them. We must make use of a cautious, I had almost said, a timorous method of proceeding. We must not attempt to fly, when we can scarcely pretend to creep. In considering any complex matter, we ought to examine every distinct ingredient in the composition, one by one; and reduce everything to the utmost simplicity; since the condition of our nature binds us to a strict law and very narrow limits. We ought afterwards to re-examine the principles by the effect of the composition, as well as the composition by that of the principles. We ought to compare our subject with things of a similar nature, and even with things of a contrary nature; for discoveries may be, and often are made by the contrast, which would escape us on the single view. The greater number of these comparisons we make, the more general and the more certain our knowledge is like to prove, as built upon a more extensive and perfect induction.
If an enquiry thus carefully conducted, should fail at last of discovering the truth, it may answer an end perhaps as useful, in discovering to us the weakness of our own understanding. If it does not make us knowing, it may make us modest. If it does not preserve us from error, it may at least from the spirit of error, and may make us cautious of pronouncing with positiveness or with basse, when so much labour may end in so much uncertainty.

I could wish that in examining this theory, the same method were pursued which I endeavoured to observe in forming it. The objections, in my opinion, ought to be proposed, either to the several principles as they are distinctly considered, or to the justness of the conclusion which is drawn from them. But it is common to pass over both the premises and conclusion in silence, and to produce as an objection, some poetical passage which does not seem easily accounted for upon the principles I endeavour to establish. This manner of proceeding I should think very improper.
improper. The task would be infinite, if
we could establish no principle until we had
previously unravelled the complex texture of
every image or description to be found in
poets and orators. And though we should
never be able to reconcile the effect of such
images to our principles, this can never
overturn the theory itself, whilst it is founded
on certain and indisputable facts. A
theory founded on experiment and not as-
sumed, is always good for so much as it ex-
plains. Our inability to push it indefinitely
is no argument at all against it. This in-
ability may be owing to our ignorance of
some necessary mediums; to a want of pro-
per application; to many other causes besides
a defect in the principles we employ. In
reality the subject requires a much closer at-
tention, than we dare claim from our man-
ner of treating it.

If it should not appear on the face of the
work, I must caution the reader against
imagining that I intended a full dissertation
on the Sublime and Beautiful. My enquiry
The PREFACE.

went no further than to the origin of these ideas. If the qualities which I have ranged under the head of the Sublime be all found consistent with each other, and all different from those which I place under the head of Beauty; and if those which compose the class of the Beautiful have the same consistency with themselves, and the same opposition to those which are classed under the denomination of Sublime, I am in little pain whether any body chuses to follow the name I give them or not, provided he allows that what I dispose under different heads are in reality different things in nature. The use I make of the words may be blamed as too confined or too extended; my meaning cannot well be misunderstood.

To conclude; whatever progress may be made towards the discovery of truth in this matter, I do not repent the pains I have taken in it. The use of such enquiries may be very considerable. Whatever turns the soul inward on itself, tends to concentrate its forces, and to fit it for greater and stronger
flights of science. By looking into physical causes our minds are opened and enlarged; and in this pursuit whether we take or whether we lose our game, the chase is certainly of service. Cicero, true as he was to the Academic philosophy, and consequently led to reject the certainty of physical as of every other kind of knowledge, yet freely confesses its great importance to the human understanding: "Est animorum ingeniorumque nostrorum naturale quoddam quasi pa- bulum consideratio contemplatioque naturæ." If we can direct the lights we derive from such exalted speculations, upon the humbler field of the imagination, whilst we investigate the springs and trace the courses of our passions, we may not only communicate to the taste a sort of philosophical solidity, but we may reflect back on the severer sciences some of the graces and elegancies of taste, without which the greatest proficiency in those sciences will always have the appearance of something illiberal.
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