THE

PHILOSOPHICAL WORKS

OF

DAVID HUME.

INCLUDING ALL THE ESSAYS, AND EXHIBITING THE MORE IMPORTANT ALTERATIONS AND CORRECTIONS IN THE SUCCESSIVE EDITIONS PUBLISHED BY THE AUTHOR.

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MDCCCLIV.
ESSAY I.

OF THE DELICACY OF TASTE AND PASSION.

Some people are subject to a certain delicacy of passion, which makes them extremely sensible to all the accidents of life, and gives them a lively joy upon every prosperous event, as well as a piercing grief when they meet with misfortune and adversity. Favors and good offices easily engage their friendship, while the smallest injury provokes their resentment. Any honor or mark of distinction elevates them above measure, but they are sensibly touched with contempt. People of this character have, no doubt, more lively enjoyments, as well as more pungent sorrows, than men of cool and sedate tempers. But, I believe, when every thing is balanced, there is no one who would not rather be of the latter character, were he entirely master of his own disposition. Good or ill fortune is very little at our disposal; and when a person that has this sensibility of temper meets with any misfortune, his sorrow or resentment takes entire possession of him, and deprives him of all relish in the common occurrences of life, the right enjoyment of which forms the chief part of our happiness. Great pleasures are much less frequent than great pains, so that a sensible temper must meet with fewer trials in the former way than in the latter. Not to mention,
that men of such lively passions are apt to be transported beyond all bounds of prudence and discretion, and to take false steps in the conduct of life, which are often irretrievable.

There is a delicacy of taste observable in some men, which very much resembles this delicacy of passion, and produces the same sensibility to beauty and deformity of every kind, as that does to prosperity and adversity, obligations and injuries. When you present a poem or a picture to a man possessed of this talent, the delicacy of his feeling makes him be sensibly touched with every part of it; nor are the masterly strokes perceived with more exquisite relish and satisfaction, than the negligences or absurdities with disgust and uneasiness. A polite and judicious conversation affords him the highest entertainment; rudeness or impertinence is as great punishment to him. In short, delicacy of taste has the same effect as delicacy of passion. It enlarges the sphere both of our happiness and misery, and makes us sensible to pains as well as pleasures which escape the rest of mankind.

I believe, however, every one will agree with me, that notwithstanding this resemblance, delicacy of taste is as much to be desired and cultivated, as delicacy of passion is to be lamented, and to be remedied, if possible. The good or ill accidents of life are very little at our disposal; but we are pretty much masters what books we shall read, what diversions we shall partake of, and what company we shall keep. Philosophers have endeavored to render happiness entirely independent of every thing external. The degree of perfection is impossible to be attained; but every wise man will endeavor to place his happiness on such objects chiefly as depend upon himself; and that is not to be attained so much by
any other means as by this delicacy of sentiment. When a man is possessed of that talent, he is more happy by what pleases his taste, than by what gratifies his appetites, and receives more enjoyment from a poem, or a piece of reasoning, than the most expensive luxury can afford.*

Whatever connection there may be originally between these two species of delicacy, I am persuaded that nothing is so proper to cure us of this delicacy of passion, as the cultivating of that higher and more refined taste, which enables us to judge of the characters of men, of the compositions of genius, and of the productions of the nobler arts. A greater or less relish for those obvious beauties which strike the senses, depends entirely upon the greater or less sensibility of the temper; but with regard to the sciences and liberal arts, a fine taste is, in some measure, the same with strong sense, or at least depends so much upon it that they are inseparable. In order to judge aright of a composition of genius, there are so many views to be taken in, so many circumstances to be compared, and such a knowledge of human nature requisite, that no man, who is not possessed of the soundest judgment, will ever make a tolerable critic in such performances. And this is a new reason for cultivating a relish in the liberal arts. Our judgment will strengthen by this exercise. We shall form juster notions of life. Many things which please or afflict others, will appear to us too frivolous to engage our

* How far the delicacy of taste, and that of passion are connected together in the original frame of the mind, it is hard to determine. To me there appears to be a very considerable connection betwixt them. For we may observe that women, who have more delicate passions than men, have also a more delicate taste of the ornaments of life, of dress, equipage, and the ordinary decencies of behavior. Any excellency in these hits their taste much sooner than ours; and when you please their taste, you soon engage their affections. — Editions A, C, D, N.
attention; and we shall lose by degrees that sensibility
and delicacy of passion which is so incommodious.

But perhaps I have gone too far, in saying that a
cultivated taste for the polite arts extinguishes the pas-
sions, and renders us indifferent to those objects which
are so fondly pursued by the rest of mankind. On fur-
ther reflection, I find, that it rather improves our sensi-
bility for all the tender and agreeable passions; at the
same time that it renders the mind incapable of the
rougher and more boisterous emotions.

Ingenuas didicisse fideliter artes,
Emollit mores, nec sinit esse feros.

For this, I think, there may be assigned two very
natural reasons. In the first place, nothing is so impro-
ing to the temper as the study of the beauties either of
poetry, eloquence, music, or painting. They give a
certain elegance of sentiment to which the rest of man-
kind are strangers. The emotions which they excite
are soft and tender. They draw off the mind from the
hurry of business and interest; cherish reflection; dis-
pose to tranquillity; and produce an agreeable melan-
choly, which, of all dispositions of the mind, is the best
suited to love and friendship.

In the second place, a delicacy of taste is favorable to
love and friendship, by confining our choice to few peo-
ple, and making us indifferent to the company and con-
versation of the greater part of men. You will seldom
find that mere men of the world, whatever strong sense
they may be endowed with, are very nice in distinguis-
ing characters, or in marking those insensible differences
and gradations, which make one man preferable to
another. Any one that has competent sense is sufficient
for their entertainment. They talk to him of their
pleasures and affairs, with the same frankness that they would to another; and finding many who are fit to supply his place, they never feel any vacancy or want in his absence. But to make use of the allusion of a celebrated French* author, the judgment may be compared to a clock or watch, where the most ordinary machine is sufficient to tell the hours; but the most elaborate alone can point out the minutes and seconds, and distinguish the smallest differences of time. One that has well digested his knowledge both of books and men, has little enjoyment but in the company of a few select companions. He feels too sensibly, how much all the rest of mankind fall short of the notions which he has entertained. And, his affections being thus confined within a narrow circle, no wonder he carries them further than if they were more general and undistinguished. The gaiety and frolic of a bottle companion improves with him into a solid friendship; and the ardors of a youthful appetite become an elegant passion.