

THE ENQUIRER. No. IX.

QUESTION: *Ought Sensibility to be cherished, or repressed?*

O, SWEET SENSIBILITY! SOUL OF THE SOUL!
 ILL PURCHAS'D THE WISDOM THAT THEE
 MUST CONTROL:
 OF THY KINDLY SPIRIT WHEN ONCE WE'RE
 BEREFT,
 IN LIFE THERE IS NOTHING WORTH LIVING
 FOR LEFT. *Dr. Aikin.*

SENSIBILITY, that peculiar structure, or habitude, of mind, which disposes a man to be easily moved, and powerfully affected, by surrounding objects and passing events, is a quality possessed in very different degrees, by different persons. The organs of some men are formed of such coarse materials, and their spirits flow in so sluggish a current, that they seem almost incapable of any other sensations than those of animal appetite; such persons, being merely flesh and blood, live for no other purpose than to consume the fruits of the earth: they doze away a languid existence, without any enjoyment superior to that of their kindred herds in the field and the stall; and at the end of their days, provided they have had enough, and to spare, lay themselves quietly down to rest. Nature, on the contrary, has cast others in so fine a mold, and framed them so susceptible of every impression of joy or grief, that scarcely a moment of their lives passes, without it's pleasures or it's pains. To such minds, not only is every real occurrence interesting, but imagination itself creates innumerable occasions of vexation or delight. Between these extremes, are many shades of temper and character, some approaching nearer to the one, and some to the other, as they have been, respectively diversified by the hand of nature or of education.

That education, as well as nature, is concerned in forming this feature of the human mind, appears from fact and experience. Though some of the seeds of sensibility are sown in every breast, favourable circumstances are necessary to bring the tender plant to maturity. Children whose natural dispositions are, in this respect, nearly alike, will discover more or less of this quality, according to the connections in which they are placed, and in proportion to the degree of culture which has been bestowed upon their understandings and their hearts. And, at

* *Nos numerus sumus, et fruges consumere nati.* Hor.

mature age, it is found, that some employments and professions are more favourable to sensibility than others; and that those who live in the daily exercise of the kind affections which belong to domestic life, commonly discover a larger portion of this quality, than those who seclude themselves from the world in solitude and celibacy.

It is evident, then, that sensibility admits of voluntary diminution or improvement: and a question of great importance in moral discipline arises, Whether this mental habit should be resolutely restrained and repressed, or industriously cherished and strengthened?

The current of taste and opinion seems, at present, to tend towards the negative side of this question. There was a time, when sensibility was taken under the patronage of that powerful arbiter of manners—fashion. Then, height of breeding was measured by delicacy of feeling; and no fine lady, or fine gentleman, was ashamed to be seen sighing over a pathetic story, or weeping at a deep-wrought tragedy. As every thing in fashionable life hastens to extremes, the affectation of refinement produced a degree of softness, which soon became ridiculous: by a sudden stroke of caprice, the polite world passed over to the contrary extreme of affected insensibility; and now it is become the mode, to consider every expression of tenderness as a mark of vulgarity; in the most interesting situations, a freezing air of indifference is assumed; those delicate tints, which the feeling heart would spread over the cheek of innocence, are concealed; the involuntary tear of sympathy, lest it should be seen, is hastily wiped away; in short, nature is banished, to introduce, in it's stead, a rude and vulgar kind of stoicism, of which Zeno would have been ashamed.

By a kind of league, which has hitherto not been common, and which is, certainly, not very natural, philosophy has associated herself with fashion, to bring sensibility into disrepute. We do not often, indeed, from the sages of the present day, hear the rant of the ancient stoic school, concerning the exclusive sufficiency of virtue to happiness, and the consequent indifference of all external circumstances. We are not told, that a wife man will raise his mind above all foreign impressions, and will not suffer himself to depend for any portion of his happiness, upon the senses or imagination; that pain does not belong to the mind, and therefore is no evil; and that compassion

passion is a weakness which philosophy ought to subdue. The doctrine of this haughty sect is, in appearance, abandoned; but it is, in truth, only a little lowered in it's tone. We are still instructed, that though the passions are a part of our constitution, which may, in the present state of things, be of use to stimulate us to necessary exertions, human nature rises in dignity, in proportion as they are restrained; and that, as we advance in moral merit, we shall become superior to the impulses of appetite and sentiment, and shall act upon general principles of wisdom, and a calm conviction of what is right. Every warm attachment, every tender feeling, the natural offspring of unavoidable associations, is, in the modern system of philosophy, absorbed in an unpassioned disposition to promote the general good. The soul, instead of experiencing endless varieties of warmth, with its perpetual changes of atmosphere, is systematically brought into one unvarying temperature, at the stationary point of universal benevolence.

In order more fully to vindicate this system, and to justify that contemptuous sneer with which its professors are much inclined to look down upon those weak souls who melt in tender sympathy at sorrows not their own, an appeal is made to experience; and we are required to observe the effects actually produced on minds easily susceptible of impressions, by the free indulgence of delicate sensibilities.

"Amongst young people, the fashionable practice of reading novels tends," it is remarked, "to produce a degree of refinement rather injurious than useful in the affairs of life. The admiration of fictitious portraits of elegance and perfection creates a distaste for such moderate attainments as are ordinarily found in real characters. The false delicacy of sentiment expressed in many of these tales, encourages an artificial reserve more likely to damp than to cherish the genuine affections of nature. Extreme sensibility, if real, is pitiable; if pretended, ridiculous. Who can endure, with patience, the weakness or the affectation which shrieks at the sight of a spider; faints at a drop of blood produced by the puncture of a needle; and

"Dies of a rose in aromatic pain?"

"With men of taste and letters, how often," it is said, "is sensibility found to be productive of more pain than pleasure! When finished performances in

the fine arts have been admired, even to satiety, and excellence has lost the charm of novelty, the powers of discrimination become fastidious, and the restless fancy chooses rather to vex itself with attending to new defects, than to seek a languid gratification from contemplating familiar beauties. Thus a poem, or a picture, which, at a lower stage of refinement, would have afforded delight, rather offends than pleases the practised critic, or the connoisseur who is *elegans in speccator formarum*.

"Sensibility, so much admired as the soul of friendship, frequently," it is added, "degenerates into irritability. The tender sympathizing friend is often seen to harass both himself and the object of his affection by suspicions and jealousies excited by causes altogether imaginary, or by trifling offences, whose touch could only be perceived by feelings irritated even to soreness. Even the unavoidable agitations of sympathy are frequently so over-powering to tender spirits, that they are inclined to offer, in earnest, a *prayer for indifference*, and say,

"Nor ease, nor peace, that heart can know,
That, like the needle true,
Turns at the touch of joy or woe,
But, turning, trembles too."

Carried to its utmost excess, this weakness produces all the paroxysms of phrensy, and even terminates in sullen misanthropy, in moody melancholy, or in raging madness."

The real existence of these facts is not disputed. Mischiefs, both ludicrous and serious, arise, it is acknowledged, from morbid sensibility. But what wise man would dry up the sources of a fertilizing stream, because its waters may sometimes be muddy, or may overflow its banks? With its natural degree of irritability, the Sensitive Plant, while it shrinks at the touch, still lives and flourishes, and, possibly, derives from the pressure which contracts its fibres, a pleasing sensation: is it to be wished, that the plant were deprived of this quality, because, with a more irritable organization, it might, perhaps, on the gentlest touch, wither and die?

The truth is, that sensibility, though liable, like every thing else, to perversion and abuse, is too natural to man, to be reasoned away by the subtilty of speculation; and too essential to his happiness, to be laughed out of the world by the dupes of whim and fashion.

Human beings depend, necessarily, for a great

a great part of their happiness on external objects; and the very essence of enjoyment is, an agreeable perception of impressions. No man is happy because he knows a truth, or believes a fact, but because he is conscious of a pleasing emotion. If, therefore, happiness be the ultimate object of pursuit, it must be the part of wisdom to cherish sensibility.

The value of sensibility is eminently seen in the pleasures of taste. The survey of grandeur and beauty affords various degrees of gratification between the simple perception of relief from the listlessness of indifference, and those strong emotions which rise into delight and rapture. To a mind susceptible of these pleasures, Nature exhibits objects of pleasing contemplation in endless variety; and Art presents her whole train of elegant amusements. Every excellent production is contemplated by such a mind with high delight, and glowing enthusiasm; for its powers of imagination are

Active and strong, and feelingly alive
To each fine impulse.

These pleasures, moreover, admit of great increase from early habit, and repeated exercise. The fancy, like every other faculty, may be improved in the acuteness of its perceptions by temperate use; and since nature is infinitely diversified in its appearances, and art admits of endless improvements in its operations the sources of the pleasures of imagination are inexhaustible. An attentive observer of nature, of an accurate judge in the fine arts, will discover innumerable beauties which escape the common eye: *Quam multa valent p. Veris que nos non videmus**. If it be possible that extreme refinement may produce a distaste for genuine beauty, and excite a fantastic admiration of that which is artificial and imaginary, correctness and delicacy of taste, under the direction of good sense, can never fail to yield a high degree of pleasure in the contemplation of real excellence: they create an idea of perfection superior to any thing which art has ever executed; and enable the critic to enjoy an exquisite gratification, in bringing the productions of poets, and other artists, to this ideal standard.

If from the pleasures of taste we pass on to those of morals, we shall find that these, also, receive their highest finishing from delicate sensibility. Who is best capable of enjoying the satisfactions

of virtuous friendship, the endearments of domestic life, and the pleasures of social intercourse? Certainly, the man whose soul is the seat of every tender and generous sentiment, and is alive to every impulse of affection. The feeling heart must, it is true, often bleed over miseries which it wants the power to relieve: and the distresses of sympathy are, in many cases, equal to those of personal suffering. But compassion is accompanied with a glow of self-approbation—a consciousness of feeling as we ought—which amply compensates its sorrows. The tears which a good man sheds over a brother in distress are “precious drops,” which, while they are received with grateful affection by the object on which they fall, the sympathizing mourner himself does not withhold. If sympathy have sorrows of its own, it has also joys, which selfish apathy cannot feel.

In young persons, the early appearance of sensibility is justly considered as a promising omen. From the child whose eye glistens with a tear at a tale of distress, who refuses unnecessarily to crush the helpless infant, and who, from a genuine feeling of pity, bestows an unprompted and unsolicited alms, we naturally expect the future expansion of kind affections and generous sentiments, in every relation of society.

With whatever contempt the votary of dissipation may affect to treat this quality, its value is universally confessed in domestic life. It is moral sensibility alone which can supply the flame of parental affection through all the labours, anxieties, and sorrows of parental duty. It is only this which forms between brothers and sisters a bond of union, which no subsequent change of situation shall be able to dissolve. Nothing, in fine, but the charm of moral sensibility can be of power sufficient to dispel the vapours of fretfulness and spleen; and, under all the cloudy skies which must be expected in the course of human life, to make the hours pass cheerfully along.

“A portion of this treasure is sometimes given,” says one who knew how to touch the finest chords of the feeling heart, “to the roughest peasant who traverses the bleakest mountain. He finds the lacerated lamb of another’s flock—This moment I behold him leaning with his head against his crook, with piteous inclination looking down upon it.—“Oh! had I come one moment sooner!”—it bleeds to death—his gentle heart bleeds.

* Cicero.

bleeds with it. Peace to thee, generous swain! I see thou walkest off with anguish—but thy joys shall balance it; for happy is thy cottage, and happy is the sharer of it, and happy are the lambs which sport about you!”

The value of sensibility is best seen in the most trying situations. Who would not wish for generous tenderness, as well as honour and integrity, in the friend to whom he should bequeath the important charge of guarding the property and the innocence, and superintending the education, of his orphan children? At the moment of distress for the loss of a parent, a wife, or a child, who would not prefer, as the companion of his sorrows, a friend who will kindly share his griefs, and echo his sighs, to one whose insensible nature, or whose cold philosophy, would lead him to treat life as a jest, and all its fond attachments as childish weaknesses, and who would be capable of insulting the silent sorrows of a wounded heart with unseasonably pleasantry? On the bed of sickness, what is there, next to conscious innocence—*mens sibi conscia relli*—so consolatory as the presence of a friend, whose sensibility will prompt him to listen with attention to your “tale of symptoms,” and to prevent your wants by kind assiduities?

To stimulate benevolence—to render social intercourse interesting and delightful—to soften asperities of temper—to promote gentleness of manners—to excite horror and indignation against savage and ferocious practices—to inspire a noble energy, and generous ardour, in the prosecution of philanthropic designs; such are the legitimate offices, the happy fruits, of sensibility. Can it admit of a doubt, whether it ought to be cherished or repressed?

The affectation of sensibility every one must despise; it is ridiculous in a woman; in a man it is disgusting. The real habit, carried to such excess as to enervate the mind, to unfit it for laborious and painful duties, and to deprive it of that self-command which a moment of danger requires, is a culpable weakness. The mother who, when she saw her child's clothes on fire, instead of seizing, on the instant, the proper means of extinguishing the flame, fell into a fit, and left her child to perish, was to be blamed as well as pitied; for she had neglected to brace up her mind to the tone of firmness necessary for meeting the possible ills of life. The mother who was capable

of retiring to write a pathetic narrative of her dying daughter's sufferings, at the moment when she ought to have been performing the last offices of maternal tenderness, was a contemptible mass of affectation. But such characters would not exist, to bring sensibility into discredit, if, while the heart is softened by frequently presenting before the imagination fictitious scenes of distress, due care were taken to enlighten the understanding and to employ the active powers in offices of humanity and kindness. The best corrective of the ridiculous follies of affectation is a well-instructed mind: and the languid imbecility which passive sympathy tends to produce, can only be prevented by the vigorous exertions of active beneficence. The masculine Genius of Philosophy would no longer be ashamed to own Sensibility for his sister, if she would always keep in mind the maxim of the good Marcus Aurelius—“Neither virtue nor vice consists in receiving impressions, but in action.”

To the Editor of the Monthly Magazine.

SIR,

I Send you a translation of the Proverbs of Ben Sira, who is believed to have been the nephew of the prophet Jeremiah. They were published, with a Collection of Hebrew Adages, at Franeker, 1597, by Drusus, and I believe have never yet appeared in English.

“Honour the physician while thou wantest him not.

* Leave the son, who is not a son, to struggle with the stream.

Pick the bone which falls in your way. Gold must be beat, and a child must be corrected.

Be good thyself, and withhold not thy hand from the good.

Woe to the wicked and to their adherents!

† Scatter thy bread upon the face of the waters, and in the deserts, and thou shalt find it at the end.

Hast thou seen a black ass? Neither a black one nor a white one.

[This the scholiast explains, “learn always so to answer as not to involve yourself in any difficulty.” This story

* The Latin is “*Filium non filium sine ut in aqua summo remiget.*” This phraseology resembles the *μυτηρ αμυτηρ* of Sophocles.

† A metaphor (says the commentator) taken from the husbandmen, who scatter their seed upon every soil; and applied to the exercise and reward of charity.