



*Reasons for contentment,
addressed to the Labouring part of the british public*

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Reasons for contentment, addressed to the Labouring
part of the british public

William Paley

Human life has been said to resemble the situation of spectators in a theatre, where, whilst each person is engaged by the scene which passes before him, no one thinks about the place in which he is seated. It is only when the business is interrupted, or when the spectator's attention grows idle and remiss, that he begins to consider at all, who is before him, or who is behind him, whether others are better accommodated than himself, or whether many be not much worse. It is thus with the various ranks and stations of society. So long as a man is intent upon the duties and concerns of his own condition, he never thinks of comparing it with any other; he is never troubled with reflections upon the different classes and orders of mankind, the advantages and disadvantages of each, the necessity or non-necessity of civil distinctions, much less does he feel within himself a disposition to covet or envy any of them. He is too much taken up with the occupations of his calling, its pursuits, cares, and business, to bestow unprofitable meditations upon the circumstances in which he sees others placed. And by this means a man of a sound and active mind has, in his very constitution, a remedy against the disturbance of envy and discontent. These passions gain no admittance into his breast, because there is no leisure there, or vacancy, for the trains of thought which generate them. He enjoys, therefore, ease in this respect, and ease resulting from the best cause, the power of keeping his imagination at home; of confining it to what belongs to himself, instead of sending it forth to wander amongst speculations which have neither limits nor use, amidst views of unattainable grandeur, fancied happiness, of extolled, because unexperienced, privileges and delights.

The wisest advice that can be given is, never to allow our attention to dwell upon comparisons between our own condition and that of others, but to keep it fixed upon the duties and concerns of the condition itself. But, since every man has not this power; since the minds of some men will be busy in contemplating the advantages which they see others possess; and since persons in laborious stations of life are wont to view the higher ranks of society with sentiments which not only tend to make themselves unhappy, but which are very different from the truth; it may be a useful office to point out to them some of those considerations which, if they *will* turn their thoughts to the subject, they should endeavour to take fairly into account.

And, first; we are most of us apt to murmur when we see exorbitant fortunes placed in the hands of single persons; larger, we are sure, than they can want, or, as we think, than they can use. This is so common a reflection that I will not say it is not natural. But, whenever the complaint comes into our minds, we ought to recollect that the thing happens in consequence of those very rules and laws which secure to ourselves our property, be it ever so small. The laws which accidentally cast enormous estates into one great man's possession, are, after all, the same laws which protect and guard the poor man. Fixed rules of property are established for one as well as another, without knowing, beforehand, whom they may affect. If these rules sometimes throw an excessive or disproportionate share to one man's lot, who can help it? It is much better that it should be so, than that the rules themselves should be broken up: and you can only have one side of the alternative or the other. To abolish riches would not be to abolish poverty; but, on the contrary, to leave it without protection or resource. It is not for the poor man to repine at the effects of laws and rules, by which he himself is benefitted every hour of his existence; which secure to him his earnings, his habitation, his bread, his life; without which he, no more than the rich man, could either eat his meal in quiet, or go to bed in safety. Of the two, it is rather more the concern of the poor to stand up for the laws, than of the rich; for it is the law which defends the weak against the strong, the humble against the

powerful, the little against the great; and weak and strong, humble and powerful, little and great, there would be, even were there no laws whatever. Beside, what, after all, is the mischief? The owner of a great estate does not eat or drink more than the owner of a small one. His fields do not produce worse crops, nor does the produce maintain fewer mouths. If estates were equally divided, would greater numbers be fed, clothed, or employed? Either, therefore, large fortunes are not a public evil, or, if they be in any degree an evil, it is to be borne with, for the sake of those fixed and general rules concerning property, in the preservation and steadiness of which all are interested.

Fortunes, however, of any kind, from the nature of the thing, can only fall to the lot of a few. I say, "from the nature of the thing." The very utmost that can be done by laws and government is to enable every man, who has health, to procure a healthy subsistence for himself and his family. Where this is the case, things are at their perfection. They have reached their limit. Were the princes and nobility, the legislators and counsellors of the land, all of them the best and wisest men that ever lived, their united virtue and wisdom could do no more than this. They, if any such there be, who would teach you to expect more, give you no instance where more has ever been attained.

But Providence, which foresaw, which appointed, indeed, the necessity to which human affairs are subjected (and against which it were impious to complain), hath contrived, that, whilst fortunes are only for a few, the rest of mankind may be happy without them. And this leads me to consider the comparative advantages and comforts which belong to the condition of those who subsist, as the great mass of the people do and must subsist, by personal labour, and the solid reasons they have for contentment in their stations. I do not now use the terms poor and rich: because that man is to be accounted poor, of whatever rank he be, and suffers the pain of poverty, whose expenses exceed his resources; and no man is, properly speaking, poor but he. But I, at present, consider the advantages of those laborious conditions of life which compose the great portion of every human community.

And, first; it is an inestimable blessing of such situations, that they supply a constant train of employment both to body and mind. A husbandman, or a manufacturer, or a tradesman, never goes to bed at night without having his business to rise up to in the morning. He would understand the value of this advantage did he know that the want of it composes one of the greatest plagues of the human soul; a plague by which the rich, especially those who inherit riches, are exceedingly oppressed. Indeed, it is to get rid of it, that is to say, it is to have something to do, that they are driven upon those strange and unaccountable ways of passing their time, in which we sometimes see them, to our surprise, engaged. A poor man's condition supplies him with that which no man can do without, and with which a rich man, with all his opportunities, and all his contrivances, can hardly supply himself; regular engagement, business to look forward to, something to be done for every day, some employment prepared for every morning. A few of better judgment can seek out for themselves constant and useful occupation. There is not one of you takes the pains in his calling which some of the most independent men in the nation have taken, and are taking, to promote what they deem to be a point of great concern to the interests of humanity, by which neither they nor theirs can even gain a shilling, and in which, should they succeed, those who are to be benefitted by their service will neither know nor thank them for it. I only mention this to show, in conjunction with what has been observed above, that, of those who are at liberty to act as they please, the wise prove, and the foolish confess, by their conduct, that a life of employment is the only life worth leading; and that the chief difference between their manner of passing their time and yours is, that they can choose the objects of their activity, which you cannot. This privilege may be an advantage to some, but for nine out of ten, it is fortunate that occupation is provided to their hands, that they have it not to seek, that it is imposed upon them by their necessities and occasions; for the consequence of liberty in this respect would be, that, lost in

the perplexity of choosing, they would sink into irrecoverable indolence, inaction, and unconcern; into that vacancy and tiresomeness of time and thought which are inseparable from such a situation. A man's thoughts must be going. Whilst he is awake, the working of his mind is as constant as the beating of his pulse. He can no more stop the one than the other. Hence if our thoughts have nothing to act upon, they act upon ourselves. They acquire a corrosive quality. They become in the last degree irksome and tormenting. Wherefore that sort of equitable engagement, which takes up the thoughts sufficiently, yet so as to leave them capable of turning to anything more important, as occasions offer or require, is a most invaluable blessing. And if the industrious be not sensible of the blessing, it is for no other reason than because they have never experienced, or rather suffered, the want of it.

Again; some of the necessities which poverty (if the condition of the labouring part of mankind must be so called) imposes are not hardships but pleasures. Frugality itself is a pleasure. It is an exercise of attention and contrivance, which, whenever it is successful, produces satisfaction. The very care and forecast that are necessary to keep expenses and earnings upon a level, form, when not embarrassed by too great difficulties, an agreeable engagement of the thoughts. This is lost amidst abundance. There is no pleasure in taking out of a large unmeasured fund. They who do that, and only that, are the mere conveyers of money from one hand to another.

A yet more serious advantage, which persons in inferior stations possess, is the ease with which they provide for their children. All the provisions which a poor man's child requires is contained in two words, "industry and innocence." With these qualities, though without a shilling to set him forwards, he goes into the world a useful, virtuous, and happy man. Nor will he fail to meet with a maintenance adequate to the habits with which he has been brought up, and to the expectations which he has formed; a degree of success sufficient for a person of any condition whatever. These qualities of industry and innocence, which, I repeat again, are all that are absolutely necessary, every parent can give to his children without expense, because he can give them by his own authority and example; and they are to be communicated, I believe, and preserved, in no other way. I call this a serious advantage of humble stations; because, in what we reckon superior ranks of life, there is a real difficulty in placing children in situations which may in any degree support them in the class and in the habits in which they have been brought up by their parents: from which great and oftentimes distressing perplexity the poor are free. With health of body, innocence of mind, and habits of industry, a poor man's child has nothing to be afraid of; nor his father or mother anything to be afraid of for him.

The labour of the world is carried on by *service*, that is, by one man working under another man's direction. I take it for granted that this is the best way of conducting business, because all nations and ages have adopted it. Consequently, service is the relation which, of all others, affects the greatest number of individuals, and in the most sensible manner. In whatever country, therefore, this relation is well and equitably regulated, in that country the poor will be happy. Now, how is the matter managed with us? Except apprenticeships, the necessity of which every one, at least every father and mother, will acknowledge, as the best, if not the only practicable, way of gaining instruction and skill, and which have their foundation in *nature*, because they have their foundation in the *natural* ignorance and imbecility of youth; except these, service in England is, as it ought to be, voluntary and by contract; a fair exchange of work for wages; an equal bargain, in which each party has his rights and his redress; wherein every servant chooses his master. Can this be mended? I will add, that a continuance of this connexion is frequently the foundation of so much mutual kindness and attachment that very few friendships are more cordial, or more sincere; that it leaves oftentimes nothing in servitude, except the name; nor any distinction but what one part is as much pleased with, and sometimes also as proud of, as the other.

What then (for this is the fair way of calculating) is there in higher stations to place against these advantages? What does the poor man see in the life or condition of the rich that should render him dissatisfied with his own?

Was there as much in sensual pleasures, I mean in the luxuries of eating and drinking, and other gratifications of that sort, as some men's imaginations would represent there to be, but which no man's experience finds in them, I contend that, even in these respects, the advantage is on the side of the poor. The rich, who addict themselves to indulgence, lose their relish. Their desires are dead. Their sensibilities are worn and tired. Hence they lead a languid, satiated existence. Hardly anything can amuse, or rouse, or gratify them. Whereas the poor man, if something extraordinary fall in his way, comes to the repast with appetite; is pleased and refreshed; derives from his usual course of moderation and temperance a quickness of perception and delight which the unrestrained voluptuary knows nothing of. Habits of all kinds are much the same. Whatever is habitual becomes smooth and indifferent, and nothing more. The luxurious receive no greater pleasures from their dainties than the peasant does from his homely fare. — But here is the difference: The peasant, whenever he goes abroad, finds a feast, whereas the epicure must be sumptuously entertained to escape disgust. They who spend every day in diversions, and they who go every day about their usual business, pass their time much alike. Attending to what they are about, wanting nothing, regretting nothing, they are both, whilst engaged, in a state of ease; but then, whatever suspends the pursuits of the man of diversion, distresses him; whereas to the labourer, or the man of business, every pause is a recreation. And this is a vast advantage which they possess who are trained and inured to a life of occupation, above the man who sets up for a life of pleasure. Novelty itself is no longer new. Amusements are become too familiar to delight, and he is in a situation in which he can never change but for the worse.

Another article which the poor are apt to envy in the rich is their *ease*. Now here they mistake the matter totally. They call inaction ease, whereas nothing is farther from it. Rest is ease. That is true; but no man can rest who has not worked. Rest is the cessation of labour. It cannot therefore be enjoyed, or even tasted, except by those who have known fatigue. The rich see, and not without envy, the refreshment and pleasure which rest affords to the poor, and choose to wonder that they cannot find the same enjoyment in being free from the necessity of working at all. They do not observe that this enjoyment must be purchased by previous labour, and that he who will not pay the price cannot have the gratification. Being without work is one thing; reposing from work is another. The one is as tiresome and insipid as the other is sweet and soothing. The one, in general, is the fate of the rich man, the other is the fortune of the poor. I have heard it said that, if the face of happiness can any where be seen, it is in the summer evening of a country village; where, after the labours of the day, each man at his door, with his children, amongst his neighbours, feels his frame and his heart at rest, everything about him pleased and pleasing, and a delight and complacency in his sensations far beyond what either luxury or diversion can afford. The rich want this; and they want what they must never have.

As to some other things which the poor are disposed to envy in the condition of the rich, such as their state, their appearance, the grandeur of their houses, dress, equipage, and attendance, they only envy the rich these things because they do not know the rich. They have not opportunities of observing with what neglect and insensibility the rich possess and regard these things themselves. If they could see the great man in his retirement, and in his actual manner of life, they would find him, if pleased at all, taking pleasure in some of those simple enjoyments which they can command as well as he. They would find him amongst his children, in his husbandry, in his garden, pursuing some rural diversion, or occupied with some trifling exercise, which are all gratifications as much within the power and reach of the poor man as of the rich; or rather more so.

To learn the art of contentment is only to learn what happiness actually consists in. Sensual pleasures add little to its substance. Ease, if by that be meant exemption from labour, contributes nothing. One, however, constant spring of satisfaction, and almost infallible support of cheerfulness and spirits, is the exercise of domestic affections; the presence of objects of tenderness and endearment in our families, our kindred, our friends. Now, have the poor anything to complain of here? Are they not surrounded by their relatives as generally as others? The poor man has his wife and children about him: and what has the rich more? He has the same enjoyment of their society, the same solicitude for their welfare, the same pleasure in their good qualities, improvement and success: their connexion with him is as strict and intimate, their attachment as strong, their gratitude as warm. I have no propensity to envy any one, least of all the rich and great; but if I were disposed to this weakness, the subject of my envy would be, a healthy young man, in full possession of his strength and faculties, going forth in a morning to work for his wife and children, or bringing them home his wages at night.

But was difference of rank or fortune of more importance to personal happiness than it is, it would be ill purchased by any sudden or violent change of condition. An alteration of circumstances, which breaks up a man's habits of life, deprives him of his occupation, removes him from his acquaintance, may be called an elevation of fortune, but hardly ever brings with it an addition of enjoyment. They to whom accidents of this sort have happened, never found them to answer their expectations. After the first hurry of the change is over, they are surprised to feel in themselves listlessness and dejection, a consciousness of solitude, vacancy, and restraint, in the place of cheerfulness, liberty and ease. They try to make up for what they have lost, sometimes by a beastly sottishness, sometimes by a foolish dissipation, sometimes by a stupid sloth; all which effects are only so many confessions, that changes of this sort were not made for man. If any public disturbance should produce, not an equality (for that is not the proper name to give it), but a jumble of ranks and professions amongst us, it is not only evident what the rich would lose, but there is also this farther misfortune, that what the rich lost the poor would not gain. I (God knows) could not get my livelihood by labour, nor would the labourer find any solace or enjoyment in my studies. If we were to exchange conditions to-morrow, all the effect would be, that we both should be more miserable, and the work of both be worse done. Without debating, therefore, what might be very difficult to decide, which of our two conditions was better to begin with, one point is certain, that it is best for each to remain in his own. The change, and the only change, to be desired, is that gradual and progressive improvement of our circumstances which is the natural fruit of successful industry; when each year is something better than the last; when we are enabled to add to our little household one article after another of new comfort or convenience, as our profits increase, or our burden becomes less; and, what is best of all, when we can afford, as our strength declines, to relax our labours, or divide our cares. This may be looked forward to, and is practicable, by great numbers in a state of public order and quiet; it is absolutely impossible in any other.

If, in comparing the different conditions of social life, we bring religion into the account, the argument is still easier. Religion smooths all inequalities, because it unfolds a prospect which makes all earthly distinctions nothing. And I do allow that there are many cases of sickness, affliction, and distress, which Christianity alone can comfort. But in estimating the mere diversities of station and civil condition, I have not thought it necessary to introduce religion into the inquiry at all; because I contend, that the man who murmurs and repines, when he has nothing to murmur and repine about, but the mere want of independent property, is not only irreligious, but unreasonable, in his complaint; and that he would find, did he know the truth, and consider his case fairly, that a life of labour, such, I mean, as is led by the labouring part of mankind in this country, has advantages in it which compensate all its inconveniences.

When compared with the life of the rich, it is better in these important respects: it supplies employment, it promotes activity. It keeps the body in better health, the mind more engaged, and, of course, more quiet. It is more sensible of ease, more susceptible of pleasure. It is attended with greater alacrity of spirits, a more constant cheerfulness and serenity of temper. It affords easier and more certain methods of sending children into the world in situations suited to their habits and expectations. It is free from many heavy anxieties which rich men feel; it is fraught with many sources of delight which they want.

If to these reasons for contentment, the reflecting husbandman or artificer adds another very material one, that changes of conditions, which are attended with a breaking up and sacrifice of our ancient course and habit of living, never can be productive of happiness, he will perceive, I trust, that to covet the stations or fortunes of the rich, or so, however, to covet them, as to wish to seize them by force, or through the medium of public uproar and confusion, is not only wickedness but folly, as mistaken in the end as in the means; *that it is not only to venture out to sea in a storm, but to venture for nothing.*

Sermon delivered in 1790; published in 1793