

ESSAYS

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Essays by Sydney Smith

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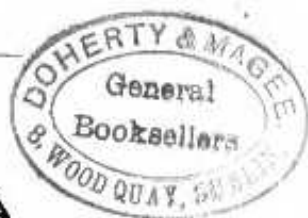
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BY SYDNEY SMITH

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ESSAYS

FROM

THE EDINBURGH REVIEW.

DR. PARR'S SPITAL SERMON. (E. REVIEW, October, 1802.)

Spital Sermon, preached at Christ Church upon Easter Tuesday, April 15, 1802. To which are added, Notes by Samuel Parr, LL.D. Printed for J. Mawman in the Poultry. 1802. Quarto. Closely printed. 1p. 161.

WHOKVER has had the good fortune to see Dr. Parr's wig, must have observed that while it trespasses a little on the orthodox magnitude of perukes in the anterior parts, it scorns even Episcopal limits behind, and swells out into boundless convexity of frizz, the *μεγα θάυμα* of barbers, and the terror of the literary world. After the manner of his wig, the Doctor has constructed his sermon, giving us a discourse of no common length, and subjoining an immeasurable mass of notes, which appear to concern every learned thing, every learned man, and almost every unlearned man since the beginning of the world.

For his text, Dr. Parr has chosen *Gal. vi. 10.* *As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good to all men, especially to those who are of the household of faith.* After a short preliminary comparison between the dangers of the selfish system, and the modern one of universal benevolence, he divides his sermon into two parts: In the first examining how far, by the constitution of human nature, and the circumstances of human life, the principles of particular and universal benevolence are compatible: In the last, commenting on the nature of the charitable institution for which he is preaching.

The former part is levelled against the doctrines of Mr. Godwin; and here Dr. Parr exposes, very strongly and happily, the folly of making universal benevolence the *immediate motive* of our actions. As we consider this, though of no very difficult execution, to be by far the best part of the sermon, we shall very willingly make some extracts from it.

"To me it appears that the modern advocates for universal philanthropy have fallen into the error charged upon those who are fascinated by a violent and extraordinary fondness for what a celebrated author calls 'some moral species.' Some men, it has been remarked, are hurried into romantic adventures, by their excessive admiration of fortune. Others are actuated by a headstrong zeal for disseminating the true religion. Hence, while the only properties for which fortune or zeal can be esteemed are scarcely discernible, from the enormous bulkiness to which they are swollen, the ends to which alone they can be directed usefully are overlooked or defeated; the public good is impaired rather than increased; and the claims that other virtues, equally obligatory, have to our notice, are totally disregarded. Thus, too, when any dazzling phantoms of universal philanthropy have seized our attention, the objects that formerly engaged it shrink and fade. All considerations of kindred, friends, and countrymen drop from the mind during the struggles it makes to grasp the collective interests of the species; and when the association that attached us to them has been dissolved, the notions we have formed of their comparative insignificance will, prevent them from recovering, I do not say any hold whatsoever, but that *strong and lasting* hold they

once had upon our conviction and our feelings. Universal benevolence, should it, from any strange combination of circumstances, ever become passionate, will, like every other passion, 'justify itself;' and the importunity of its demands to obtain a hearing will be proportionate to the weakness of its cause. But what are the consequences? A perpetual wrestling for victory between the refinements of sophistry and the remonstrances of indignant nature—the agitations of secret distrust in opinions which gain few or no proselytes, and feelings which excite little or no sympathy—the neglect of all the usual duties, by which social life is preserved or adorned: and in the pursuit of other duties which are unusual, and indeed imaginary, a succession of airy projects, eager hopes, tumultuous efforts, and galling disappointments, such in truth as every wise man foresaw, and a good man would rarely commiserate."

In a subsequent part of his sermon, Dr. Parr handles the same topic with equal success:

"The stoics, it has been said, were more successful in weakening the tender affections than in animating men to the stronger virtues of fortitude and self command; and possible it is that the influence of our modern reformers may be greater in furnishing their disciples with pleas for the neglect of their ordinary duties, than in stimulating their endeavours for the performance of those which are extraordinary, and perhaps ideal. If, indeed, the representations we have lately heard of universal philanthropy served only to amuse the fancy of those who approve of them, and to communicate that pleasure which arises from contemplating the magnitude and grandeur of a favourite subject, we might be tempted to smile at them as groundless and harmless. But they tend to debase the dignity, and to weaken the efficacy of those particular affections, for which we have daily and hourly occasion in the events of real life. They tempt us to substitute the ease of speculation and the pride of dogmatism for the toil of practice. To a class of artificial and ostentatious sentiments they give the most dangerous triumph over the genuine and salutary dictates of nature. They delude and inflame our minds with pharisaical notions of superior wisdom and superior virtue; and what is the worst of all, they may be used as a 'cloak to us' for insensibility, where other men feel; and for negligence, where other men act with *visible* and *useful*, though *limited* effect."

In attempting to show the connection between particular and universal benevolence, Dr. Parr does not appear to us to have taken a clear and satisfactory view of the subject. Nature impels us both to good and bad actions; and, even in the former, gives us no measure by which we may prevent them from degenerating into excess. Rapine and revenge are not less natural than parental and filial affection; which latter class of feelings may themselves be a source of crimes, if they overpower (as they frequently do) the sense of justice. It is not, therefore, a sufficient justification of our actions, that they are natural. We must seek, from our reason, some principle which will enable us to determine what impulses of nature we are to obey, and what we are to resist: such is that of general utility, or, what is the same thing, of universal good; a principle which sanctifies and limits the more particular affections. The duty of a son to a parent, or a parent to a son, is not an ultimate principle of morals, but depends on the principle of universal good, and is only praiseworthy, because it is found to promote it. At the same time, our spheres of action and intelligence are so confined, that it is better, in a great majority of instances, to suffer our conduct to be guided by those affections which have been long sanctioned by the approbation of mankind, than to enter into a process of reasoning, and investigate the relation which every trifling event might bear to the general interests of the world. In his principle of universal benevolence, Mr. Godwin is unquestionably right. That it is the grand principle on which all morals rest—that it is the corrective for the excess of all particular affections, we believe to be undeniable; and he is only erroneous in excluding the particular affections, because in so doing, he deprives us of our most powerful means of promoting his own principle of universal good; for it is as much as to say, that all the crew ought to have the *general* welfare of the ship so much at heart, that no sailor should ever pull any *particular* rope, or hand any *individual* sail. By uni-

versal benevolence, we mean, and understand Dr. Parr to mean, not a barren affection for the species, but a desire to promote their real happiness; and of this principle he thus speaks:

"I admit, and I approve of it, as an *emotion* of which general happiness is the cause, but not as a passion, of which, according to the usual order of human affairs, it could often be the object. I approve of it as a disposition to wish, and, as opportunity may occur, to desire and do good, rather than harm, to those with whom we are quite unconnected."

It would appear, from this kind of language, that a desire of promoting the universal good were a pardonable weakness, rather than a fundamental principle of ethics; that the particular affections were incapable of excess; and that they never wanted the corrective of a more generous and exalted feeling. In a subsequent part of his sermon, Dr. Parr atones a little for this overzealous depreciation of the principle of universal benevolence; but he nowhere states the particular affections to derive their value and their limits from their subservience to a more extensive philanthropy. He does not show us that they exist only as virtues, from their instrumentality in promoting the general good; and that, to preserve their true character, they should be frequently referred to that principle as their proper criterion.

In the latter part of his sermon, Dr. Parr combats the general objections of Mr. Turgot to all charitable institutions, with considerable vigour and success. To say that an institution is necessarily bad, because it will not always be administered with the same zeal, proves a little too much; for it is an objection to political and religious, as well as to charitable institutions; and, from a lively apprehension of the fluctuating characters of those who govern, would leave the world without any government at all. It is better there should be an asylum for the mad, and a hospital for the wounded, if they were to squander away 50 *per cent.* of their income, than that they should be disgusted with sore limbs, and shocked by straw-crowned monarchs in the streets. All institutions of this kind must suffer the risk of being governed by more or less of probity and talents. The good which one active character effects, and the wise order which he establishes, may outlive him for a long period; and we all hate each other's crimes, by which we gain nothing, so much, that in proportion as public opinion acquires ascendancy in any particular country, every public institution becomes more and more guaranteed from abuse.

Upon the whole, this sermon is rather the production of what is called a sensible, than of a very acute man; of a man certainly more remarkable for his learning than his originality. It refutes the very refutable positions of Mr. Godwin, without placing the doctrine of benevolence in a clear light; and it almost leaves us to suppose that the particular affections are themselves ultimate principles of action, instead of convenient instruments of a more general principle.

The style is such, as to give a general impression of heaviness to the whole sermon. The Doctor is never simple and natural for a single instant. Every thing smells of the rhetorician. He never appears to forget himself, nor to be hurried by his subject into obvious language. Every expression seems to be the result of artifice and intention; and as to the worthy dedicatees, the Lord Mayor and Aldermen, unless the sermon be *done into English by a person of honour*, they may perhaps be flattered by the Doctor's politeness, but they can never be much edified by his meaning. Dr. Parr seems to think that eloquence consists not in an exuberance of beautiful images—not in simple and sublime conceptions—not in the feelings of the passions; but in a studious arrangement of *sonorous, exotic, and sesquipedal* words; a very ancient