

**Essay on the progressive improvement of mankind. An oration, delivered in the chapel of Trinity College, Cambridge, on the day of Commemoration. Monday, Dec. 17, 1798 / [Anon].**

**Contributors**

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ON THE  
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THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

PHYSICS DEPARTMENT

REPORT OF THE  
COMMISSIONERS OF THE  
BOARD OF PHYSICS  
AND ASTRONOMY  
FOR THE YEAR 1901

BOARD OF PHYSICS  
AND ASTRONOMY

REPORT OF THE BOARD

FOR THE YEAR 1901

## ESSAY, &c.

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THE rapid fury of the elements, and the gradual ravages of time; the ill success of merit, and the mutability of fortune, have afforded exemplifications, which cannot be denied to be striking and impressive, to those moralists, whose intention appears to have been, by depreciating all that others have admired, by expatiating upon the vanity of eloquence, wisdom, and courage, to exaggerate to mankind the imperfection of their powers, the folly of their pursuits, and the insignificance of their determinations. Sounding and declamatory, but false and hollow, are the arguments of those who would extinguish the fire of ambition, and deter youth from aspiring to eminence; would lull genius into inactivity, because its exertions may be repaid with ingratitude; and repress enterprize, because it is always exposed to the danger of failure. The ancient Poet did not consult either for the welfare or glory of his country, when he made the eloquence of Demosthenes, and the conduct of Hannibal, the objects of his satire; and by a malignant exultation in their

misfortunes, induced his readers to undervalue their excellencies. The actions of the great are never performed in vain, until they are forgotten. Demosthenes, though unable to arouse the sluggish Athenians, armed succeeding patriots with more successful thunders; and the achievements of Hannibal taught other leaders to conquer, in causes less unworthy of their swords.

Nature herself had seemed to have forbidden that any human works should be eternal; and by that means to have thrown an insurmountable obstacle in the way of the improvement of man; who, like Sisyphus in the fable, was unable, however he might strive, to advance beyond a certain boundary, which having attained, all the space was again to be measured, and all the toil renewed. The labours of the poet and the philosopher, were not more durable than those of the sculptor and the architect. Transactions were forgotten, as the characters were obliterated from the manuscript of the historian; and the names of the illustrious perished as the colours faded from the canvas, on which the pencil of the artist had delineated their forms. The experience of one age remained not to instruct the succeeding. The maxims of the politician, and the discoveries of the sage, were destroyed by the blind fury of barbarous conquerors, or more surely effaced by the corroding lapse of years. Knowledge was thus always fleeting and uncertain. The wise,

deprived of the assistance of their predecessors, were condemned to toil only upon the surface, and to lament that life afforded them not leisure to proceed beyond the rudiments of science.

To give to the world the means of perpetuating wisdom, and transmitting experience; of delivering down inventions which sagacity might improve, and of bequeathing the truth or falsehood of conjectures to be ascertained by posterity, was a work worthy of the active spirit and prompt dexterity of man. It was effected. The Chinese invented, and a few obscure Germans brought to perfection, an art, which gives to merit to defy the attacks of time; excites genius, by holding forth the reward of immortality; and cheers the laborious hours of those who devote themselves to study, with the flattering hope, that they are toiling, not for their own country alone, but for the whole world, not for the present race, but for every generation that is hereafter to arise on the face of the earth.

Before this discovery, the improvement of man could not be termed progressive: it was confined in its operation, and liable to long and frequent interruption. He emerged, indeed, from the woods and caverns; he assembled societies; he founded cities; he instituted laws, and cultivated learning. The arts reaped their noblest triumphs. The canvas glowed with ani-

mation, and the marble swelled beneath the chisel into life. Philosophy, in her colonnades and gardens, dictated her solemn truths; Eloquence poured her loudest thunders; and Poetry breathed her most enchanting strains. The great and unwieldy empire of Rome, under which, notwithstanding the corruption of manners and the depravation of taste, the productions of genius were still admired and preserved, now tottered to its fall. The barbarous hordes descended from the north. Literature, having no reliance except upon perishable transcripts of her works, was soon involved in the common ruin. The statues were broken, the pictures were defaced, the volumes committed to the flames; and the precious relics that escaped the savages, are but the venerable vestiges of genius, and the splendid fragments of excellence. An age of sterility intervened. A period of thick darkness now brooded over the earth; and the mind of man slept deprived of all its energies, and forgetful of every thing that it had been accustomed to consider honourable and great.

The nations of Europe, after a long contented repose, began to arouse themselves from their lethargy. Religious enthusiasm awakened the ardour of heroism; and the wild, but fascinating spirit of chivalry, whose actions were the offsprings of disinterested valour, that looked for no reward but the smile of favouring beauty, and the grateful tear of redressed misfortune, taught

that humanity and benevolence were as meritorious as undaunted courage and athletic strength. Justice resumed her seat, long usurped by Fanaticism; who had substituted for evidence, appeals to heaven by heated ploughshares, and trials by combat; and expected that Nature would divest the elements of their powers, and enfeeble the limbs that she had strung with vigour, in order to point out to the judges, the guilt or innocence, which they had it in their power to discover by means sufficiently easy, and evident. Knowledge advanced with a slow and timid step from the cells of the monks, in which she had lain hid, while her rival, Ignorance, had been exalted to palaces and thrones; had been the pride of the noble, and the first boast of the ecclesiastic.

But still there was no security, that this rising dawn of reason might not in an instant be overcast, and these infant origins of future happy consequences were but ill protected against the powerful attacks of those who, interested in the continuation of abuse, would strain every nerve to harden prejudice, to encourage folly, and to perpetuate error. Barbarism might have resumed her sway; Learning might have been inextricably entangled in the quibbles of schoolmen; Superstition might have deepened the gloom of her monasteries, or even have triumphantly replaced the statue of Jupiter in the Capitol. Against a



return of those slavish and disgraceful days, the Art of Printing is a sufficient safeguard. The most unlimited power would be unable to effect the destruction of the records of science; and the general diffusion of knowledge, renders it improbable that a design should be conceived, so inimical to the interests of mankind.

This discovery facilitated and insured the progress of improvement, which may be traced from the commencement of the eleventh century, making its way through every generation, and extending itself to every class of society, like a river, which, springing from a scanty fountain, gradually, as it is swelled by the influx of other streams, scoops for itself a more capacious channel, and tacitly undermining, or impetuously bearing down every obstacle that impedes its way, rolls majestically onwards to the point of its destination. But the course of this river has not been always equable and temperate:—increased by torrents, or irritated by resistance, it has often poured forth a destroying deluge, and for a time has made a desert of the country it should have gladdened and fertilized. But the waters subside again into their channel. Convulsions, dreadful indeed at the moment, have often proved beneficial in their remoter consequences; and the superior advantages which later ages possess, have arisen from the crimes as well as the virtues

of their forefathers. The evils of tyranny made more manifest the blessings of freedom; and the horrors of anarchy taught the necessity of subordination. Excess and violence defeat, rather than advance their own ends, dispel the darkness they intend to thicken, and accelerate the hour they design to retard. The bigots, who led Europe forth in arms against the Infidels, little thought that the intercourse of nations with one another, and their communication with their more polished enemy, would arouse their faculties, clear their judgment, wear off their prejudices, produce in them a spirit of liberality, and thus cherish the principles of toleration, amidst the most determined and inveterate rancour of persecution. While by a series of enormities, from the contemplation of which the eye turns aching away, the Spaniards were establishing their empire in the new world, they knew not what a material alteration they were bringing about in the old; while, by every wantonness of cruelty, every subtlety of torture, and every outrage of power, they were breaking the fortitude and debasing the minds of the Americans; while with ingenious absurdity they were weaving arguments to prove that the creatures they had discovered, were an inferior race of beings, they knew not that, in their own quarter of the globe, they were emancipating thousands from the yoke of servitude, were giving the last blow to the tyranny of the Barons, and were relieving Europe from the perpetual wars and cala-

mities attendant upon the feudal system of government. Thus much improvement has resulted from the basest passions that disgrace human nature. Crime is a curse only to the period in which it is successful; but virtue, whether fortunate or otherwise, blesses not only its own age, but remotest posterity; and is as beneficial by its example, as by its immediate effects.

And here it may be observed with joy and congratulation, that although antiquity may boast of its unrivalled superiority in literature, of the more powerful energy of its governments, and the public spirit of its patriots; the modern world instantly attained a pitch of civilization and humanity, which had certainly never been reached by nations, amongst whom servitude was sanctioned by law, and despotism was an inmate of every family; whose public spectacles were amphitheatres stained with human gore; whose amusements were the torments of mangled men; and whose gratification was the death of their fellow-creatures. The most oppressive tyranny that has existed since the destruction of the feudal government, has never imposed upon its subjects a state of such abject degradation and dependance, as by these customs, the vaunted favourites of liberty, the darling themes of poetry and eloquence, the republics of ancient Greece, and the most sanguinary fury of superstition has scarcely equalled, by the periodical murders of the inquisition, the horrors

which were exhibited amongst the Romans, in their most enlightened days, for the sport and entertainment of the populace. That modern annals have not been deformed by any enormities so dreadful and atrocious as these, is the blessed effect of the doctrines of Him, who came not as an earthly conqueror, to dictate his religion amidst the heaps of the slain, and the agonizing groans of the wounded; whose paths were not to be traced by the blood his battles had spilled, whose kingdoms were not to be distinguished by the desolation his triumphs had occasioned.

After that we have acknowledged, with reverential gratitude, this holy origin of charity and benevolence, we may remark, that nothing has contributed more to propagate and bring into practice its precepts, than the wide extension of commerce, which, when by the discovery of the compass, the trackless ocean became as it were a certain path, promoted the intercourse of people with people, shewed individuals how necessary they are to one another, and thus mollified the unfriendly disposition, the unnecessary independence and contempt of obligation, which is fostered by the sternness and poverty of nations, that rely almost entirely upon their own soil and their own labour for subsistence.—It is this which has worn away harshness, has awakened generosity, has bade us feel for error as well as mis-

fortune, has opened every heart to the social affections, and has encouraged and cherished those virtues which increase every day in private life, scatter blessings upon all around them, and secure eternal satisfaction to themselves. Man is improved; improved in the most essential point; in his consideration for man. War, even horrid war, has submitted itself to the regulations of humanity, which have restrained the indiscriminate carnage that involved those who yielded, and those who resisted, in one destruction, and polluted the glory of the conqueror with the blood of the defenceless suppliant.

Complaints of general degeneracy inflame the rage of the satirist, and adorn the periods of the rhetorician; but they have as little foundation in truth, as the hyperboles of those ancient poets, who, to celebrate and magnify the bodily strength of their heroes, represented them singly lifting, and hurling with ease, a weight which the united efforts of twelve of their own cotemporaries would have been unable to move. Particular periods are distinguished by the lustre of genius, and ages are hallowed by the characters that chance to ornament them. But that is a false judgment of the public temper and disposition, which is formed upon those illustrious spirits, whose notions, confined to no age and no country, reach far beyond the narrow views, mean prejudices, and little passions, that actuate the generality of

mortals. The mass of mankind can be amended only by experience, and experience can be acquired only by time.—Every setting sun leaves behind it new instruction; every day spreads truths already ascertained, confirms those that have been hitherto doubtful, affords tests to detect fallacy, and establishes precedents to guide uncertainty. Practice is perpetually proving or disproving theory, and events continually arise to shew the providence or short sightedness of speculation. The sparks thus struck out by collision, blaze into a flame which brightens as it burns. Notwithstanding the philippics so vehemently urged against tyranny and bigotry, I think it may plainly be perceived, that principles more moderate and conciliatory, have been gradually insinuating themselves into the frame, and mixing with the body of every human institution; that religion has been willing to allow a wider latitude to opinion, and that government has inclined to relax any unnecessary severity of restriction. But I am afraid that these happy intentions have been in some measure checked, by fear of the wild theories promulgated by some, and by attention to the hesitating caution recommended by others. There are those who, in the flourishing state of civil society, see a cause of indignation and sorrow, rather than of delight and triumph; who regret the simplicity of the state of nature their own imaginations have formed, and discover the source of all vice in the effeminacy of the arts, and the refine-

ment of the sciences. When the praise of eloquence and ingenuity shall have been allowed to these visionaries, they will have obtained all that they can with justice lay claim to, and probably all that they ever expected to receive. Those are more plausible, and consequently more dangerous reasoners, who would at once reject novelty without examination, stifle all innovation, and contend that abuses are to be endured, because it is difficult or hazardous to reform them. In answer to these it may be observed, that they can find no age except their own, by which they now wish that their principles had been adopted, and, consequently, that their opposition to any alteration may proceed as much from present motives of self-interest, as from any real dread of the disasters they give out that they apprehend.

But neither the frenzy of the former, nor the timidity of the latter, can control the impatient intellect of man.—That pursues difficulty, acquires new strength and spirit from resistance, and, like the ambitious hero of the poet, thinks nothing effected, while any thing remains that defies its strength, eludes its penetration, or baffles its perseverance.

She, conscious of the source from whence she springs,

By reason's light, on resolution's wings,

Spite of her frail companion, dauntless goes  
 O'er Lybia's deserts, and through Zembla's snows ;  
 She bids each slumbering energy awake,  
 Another touch, another temper take ;  
 Suspends th' inferior laws that rule our clay :  
 The stubborn elements confess her sway ;  
 Their little wants, their low desires refine,  
 And raise the mortal to a height divine.

*Gray. Fragment of an Essay.*

While generation is following generation, while the sceptre of power is passing from the grasp of one nation into that of another ; while the dank dews of night are imperceptibly wearing away the monument and the column ; while cities are going to decay, and stupendous piles of marble and brass moulder into dust ; while the material universe bears evident marks of its perishable composition, and the astronomer in vain requires the star which his predecessors have observed in the heavens ; the mind of man grows more vigorous from time, and is ever struggling onwards with increased energy, in pursuit of that perfection, which to have sought after, though perhaps it can never be attained, exalts and glorifies human nature. And when we reflect upon what mortal powers have already accomplished ; when we remember that the den of the savage has risen into the



palace of the monarch, and that the forest has been cleared away to make room for the city; that the bowels of the earth have not been inaccessible, and that the summits of the mountains protect not their productions; that the unfathomable deep has been made subservient to our convenience, and the boisterous wind the minister to our desires; that science has looked through nature, and that the laws of heaven have not been hidden from the researches of the philosopher; are we not tempted to exclaim—the creature who has done these things, can do more; and if at any time all intellectual faculty could be concentrated to produce one great end, the advancement of truth; if learning would exert itself only to instruct, and wit would exercise its lash only on that which is deserving of contempt, what obstacle might not be surmounted, what perplexity might not be unravelled, what obscurity might not be dispelled? Such an æra may perhaps exist only in the dreams of enthusiasm; but that is no unpleasing nor unprofitable vision, which invigorates every generous feeling, arouzes every dormant faculty, animates within us the love of virtue, and leads us nearer at least to that model of excellence, which it holds forth as the reward of our exertions. That the hope of attaining this reward may ever strongly actuate the human race, is surely no dangerous or imprudent prayer. May it pass from the north to the south, from the east to the west; may it civilize the rude millions of Africa,

and pour the light of science upon the subterranean darkness of the Laplander; may it abash the proud front of insolent superiority, and exalt the meek brow of dependence; may it shower plenty upon the dwellings of penury; may it strike the fetter from the galled limbs of the supplicating slave; may it shame injustice; may it baffle oppression, and lighten the load of misfortune wheresoever it lies heavy upon the innocent; may it proceed in this glorious career, promoting throughout the habitable world, wheresoever there exists an intellect to conceive, or a voice to assert the truth, the cause of rational Liberty!—of rational Liberty; not of that grievous despotism, which, generated by luxury, by tyranny, by vice and corruption, has grown up into a monster even more abandoned and abominable than its parents; and still unsated, after the desolation of Europe, crosses the sea in search of new climes, where for ages the peaceful plains have not been wounded by the hoof of the war-horse, nor the echoes have reverberated the clang of the trumpet, that other victims may tell, from woeful experience, of its specious appearances and delusive promises, of its open rapine, wanton cruelty, and undisguised injustice. It must be the earnest and incessant supplication of all, whose bosoms exult in the joy, and grieve for the misery of others, that this sanguinary spirit of ferocity and intolerance, which has been permitted, for purposes to us inscrutable, so long and so dreadfully to scourge the

world, may fade away before the temperate influence of Freedom; of her whose triumphs are not in cities sacked with fire and sword, nor in desolated provinces; whose trophies are raised over subdued ignorance, error, and prejudice; whose delight is in the progress of the mind, and the amelioration of the heart; whose attributes are benevolence and compassion; whose first great hope is peace perpetual and unbroken, and whose only object is the universal happiness of man.