

**THE CONNEXION
BETWEEN TASTE AND
MORALS: TWO
LECTURES, PP. 5-62**

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The Connexion Between Taste and Morals: Two Lectures, pp. 5-62 by Mark Hopkins

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CONNEXION

BETWEEN

TASTE AND MORALS:

1873

TWO LECTURES

BY

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1841.

THE following Lectures, as will appear from their structure, were originally prepared for a popular audience ; but they are so nearly related to my course on *Morals*, that they have usually been read in connexion with it. At the request of the Senior Class, I now put them into their hands for publication, in the hope that they may contribute something towards producing, especially on this ground, a higher standard and a more intimate union of *Taste and Morals*.

Williams College, May 10th, 1841.

LECTURE I.

Is the prevalence of a cultivated taste, favorable to morals? Is there a connexion, either in individuals, or in communities, between good taste and good morals?

When I began to reflect upon this point with reference to a public discussion of it, I put the above questions to three educated men, as I happened to meet them. The first said, he had not thought of it, but that, at the first view, he did not believe there was any such connexion; the second said he should wish to see it proved before he would believe it; and the third said, he thought there was such a connexion. This difference of opinion among educated men, led me to think that an investigation of the subject might be a matter of interest, and perhaps of profit. As every thing, in this country, depends upon a sound state of morals in the community, whatever bears upon that, deserves our most careful scrutiny.

To discuss this subject understandingly, we must know precisely what we are talking about. What then is taste? This term is sometimes used to express mere desire, as a taste for dress, or for low pleasures. It can hardly be necessary to say that that is not the meaning now attached to it. Taste is defined by Alison, to be, "That faculty of the human mind by which we perceive and enjoy whatever is beautiful or sublime in the works of nature or of art." According to this definition, which is sufficiently correct for our present purpose, it will be perceived that there is, first, a perception of certain qualities in external objects, and then, according to the nature of the object, an emotion of beauty, or of sublimity in the mind. These emotions are, of course, incapable of definition except by stating the occasions on which they arise, and can be known only by being felt. To talk of an emotion to those who have not felt it, is like talking of colors to the blind. And here I may remark, that these terms, beauty and sublimity, have, in common with those denoting sensations, an ambiguity which has often produced confusion. As the term heat is used to denote both the sensation we feel on approaching the fire, and that quality in the fire which produces the sensation, so beauty and sublimity are sometimes used to express the emotions in the mind, and sometimes those qualities in external objects which are fitted to produce them, though there is, of course, in the external object, no emotion, nor any thing resembling one.

If this account of taste be correct, it will be perceived that it cannot, with any propriety, be compared, as it often has been, to a bodily sense. The impression upon a bodily sense, necessarily follows the presence of the object, and is uniform in all mankind. A tree clothed in fresh foliage is necessarily seen, and seen to be green by all who turn their eyes upon it. The same tree, when seen, may be pronounced by one individual to be beautiful, by another, from some peculiar association, to be the reverse, and by a third, however beautiful in itself, it may be looked upon without any emotion at all. It is, therefore, a great mistake to suppose, as many do, that those qualities in objects which awaken the emotions of taste, act directly and necessarily upon us, like those which affect the senses.

A second preliminary inquiry is, What are the causes which produce these emotions? And here I barely remark, without inquiring after any common principle by which they produce similar results, that these causes differ widely from each other. The emotions may be awakened by natural objects, by sound, by the products of the imagination, by the combinations of the intellect, and by certain manifestations of the affections and moral character.

A third inquiry is, how the taste can be cultivated? This obviously can be done only on two conditions. The first is, that we put ourselves in situations adapted to produce the emotions of taste; and the second is, that we preserve a state of mind that will permit those emotions to arise. This last, a proper state of

mind, though less often considered, is quite as important as the first. "It is," says the poet,

"The soul that sees; the outward eyes
Present the object, but the mind descries,
And thence delight, disgust, or cool indifference rises."

Upon him whose mind is engrossed by care, or ruffled by passion, the most beautiful objects make no impression. To perceive and enjoy them, the mind must be calm. The beauties and sublimities of nature are like the stars, which the storm shuts out, but when the heavens are serene, they come out, one after another, to the eye that is watching for them, till the firmament glows with their light. He, therefore, and he only, who, in a proper state of mind, will place himself in the presence of beautiful or sublime objects, and will compare the effects produced under different circumstances, will improve his taste, both in its susceptibility to emotion, and in its power of discrimination.

The question then, which we are now prepared to discuss, is, whether such a cultivation and improvement of the taste, has a favorable effect upon the moral character?

That it has such an effect, I infer, first, because we find in the emotions of taste, to say the least, an innocent source of enjoyment for our leisure hours, and the mind that is innocently happy, is less accessible to temptation. Indolence, mere vacuity, we all know, is the porch of vice, and the great dangers to the young arise from their leisure hours—from the

want of some means of innocent mental exhilaration, in which they can be induced to spend those hours. It was said by Franklin, that leisure was a time in which to do something useful ; but all are not Franklins. If leisure time can be, as it is by many, usefully employed, so much the better ; but he who should provide for our youth the means and the inducements to spend their leisure time innocently, would be a public benefactor. In our cities, where the temptations to mere sensual gratification are so numerous and obtrusive, and where natural objects are very much excluded, this is a point of great importance, and of great difficulty. Until of late very little of this kind has been attempted, unless theatres may be called an attempt. But theatres with us are out of the question, for Miss Martineau says that "the Americans have very little dramatic taste ; and that the spirit of puritanism still rises up in such fierce opposition to the stage, as to forbid the hope that this grand means of intellectual exercise will ever be made the instrument of moral good to society there, that it might be made." She says, moreover, so hopeless is our case, that "those who respect dramatic entertainments the most highly, will be the most anxious that the American theatres should be closed." Theatres are indeed out of the question, and I trust it will be a long time before we shall make progress backwards, to that state of morals which is produced by the instructions even of an English theatre.

It is in view of the want now under consideration, that the establishment of Associations for literary