

Annotated by Kelly Plante

*Some reflections and deductions drawn from the works of Nature in general.*

AS we are now on the point of concluding the present design of this work, it is necessary that we should form some kind of conclusion to that part of it which has had a relation to the works of Nature, and the study of philosophy. A conclusion, I say, with respect to our confined and narrow limits herein; for such is the immense scope and extent which those subjects would have afforded us, that could the prosecution of our plan have been pursued beyond the period of life allotted to ourselves or our children, nay, even to the farthest stretch of time, our researches into the wonders of Nature's inexhaustible storehouse, would have been no other than the pursuance of an apparent horizon, the boundaries of which are ever flying before us, and although they every moment present us with a fresh variety of enchanting objects, yet are, with respect to ourselves, as absolutely distant at the last as at the first moment of our journey. But to proceed.

From even the very small portion concerning which we have been enabled to enter into a detail, [Page 858] of the numberless amazing properties bestowed on mankind and on the other parts of the animal creation, what is the first, the most natural deduction that must occur to every one? What, when we perceive that every one of the organs of this grand machine, not only the larger and more apparently useful, but even the more minute, insignificant, and almost invisible ones, are furnished in the amplest manner, not barely with such parts, such limbs, such mechanism, as are needful for their mere existence, but still more particularly with such peculiar contrivances,<sup>1</sup> such sagacity,<sup>2</sup> such intellectual faculties, as must render that existence, with respect to the place, station, and allotment of each individual, absolutely and perfectly happy:—such properties as enable every one of those beings to preserve that existence, though surrounded by numberless dangers, and to procure the means of supporting it in the midst of apparent scarcity and want. What, when we perceive these assistances bestowed on them with an endless variety, with such a peculiar propriety to every single animal, as if each was of itself the sole and peculiar care of Providence:—What, I say, must be the immediate result of these observations, but that the whole must be the work of infinite power, of infinite wisdom, of infinite goodness? Who can cast his eyes around him even with the slightest reflection on what he sees on every side, but must immediately cry out with the royal philosopher, 'How manifold are thy works, O Lord! in wisdom hast thou made them all!' [Page 859] Can any one perceive the work of amazing art, and maintain one moment's doubt of the existence of the artist?—Must he not indeed be a fool who can say in his heart there is no God?

If then this reflection is the first that must arise from this delightful study, and most undoubtedly it is so, can we possibly give scope thereto without proceeding still farther, and finding that due

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<sup>1</sup> "Scheme; plan" ([Johnson's Dictionary Online](#), "Contrivance, n.s.")

<sup>2</sup> "Acuteness of discovery" ([Johnson's Dictionary Online](#), "Sagacity, n.s.")

influence produced by it on our minds which must lead us to the warmest gratitude, and the most ardent zeal to do every thing that may lead towards the rendering our services acceptable in his sight? Can we look with unconcern on all these wondrous operations? Can we perceive these incomprehensible proofs of infinite perfection, in what are but the mechanical exertion, perhaps no more than the sport, if we may be allowed the expression, of his wisdom and power, without conceiving an idea infinitely more exalted of the almighty mind? Can we be blind to the proofs that these present us with, of his being equally the origin of all purity, and the possessor of all ability? Can we avoid being convinced that

He must delight in virtue,

And that which he delights in must be happy?

How strong an incitement this to the practice of that virtue which, at the same time, delights that Being whose minutest pleasure ought to be our supremest joy, and ensures our own happiness in the very act itself! How eminent then the advantage to ourselves, and the good to society in general, which might be derived from a proper [Page 860] application of this study! and from how evident a parity of reasoning will every thinking man be convinced, whilst he sees every part of the creation in general formed with such a connection, such a necessary dependance on every other part, as well as on the great whole, how strongly, I say, will he be convinced of the duty incumbent on himself to promote as much as possible this grand design, and render his every action conducive to it, in the peculiar circle which heaven has assigned to him to fill? In how smooth, how tranquil a path might all the transactions of this world proceed, would every man but carry the reflection from natural to moral connections; and, persuaded, that his own happiness must proportionably depend on that of every individual [Page 861] around him, labour to accelerate the movement of these admirably contrived wheels, instead of clogging them with the intricate machinery of self-interest, or dragging them back with the weight of vice and folly.

But now let us consider Nature's works in a second point of view, let us consider man, and every other animated part of the creation as a separate and detached being, and placed in his peculiar sphere without connection or relationship with any other: even in this light how admirable, how incomprehensible is the extent of omnipotent care in this formation of each! How amazingly is each animal provided by the all-wise Fountain of good with every means for his preservation! how admirably are dangers and necessities spread around him, as if they were designed to shew the unlimited wisdom of the Creator in the variety of means pointed out to him for avoiding the one, and relieving the other; at the same time that both are rendered the instruments of his happiness, from that consciousness of relief which heightens the enjoyment of every blessing by a sensibility of the misery attached to its opposite situation.

In this view how much has man in particular to felicitate himself upon! how many grateful reflections ought his mind to overflow with when he considers his situation as more exposed,

more helpless in its original and apparent state than that of any other animal; yet in the course of life, in the period of his existence more thoroughly protected, more perfectly supplied with conveniencies than that of his fellow-creatures would be, even if the various resources of them all could be united for the service of each individual. With what an eye of admiration ought he to look up to the Being, who, by a peculiar distinction, has so highly and almost partially favoured him, as to bestow on him alone that single spark from heaven, that emanation from himself, which in itself answers every purpose that any thing beneath immortality ought to wish for the power of executing.

Again, let us permit this last reflection to produce another very proper effect on our minds, and at the same time that it inspires us with the most exalted degree of acknowledgment to the just giver of all things, suffer it to strike us with [Page 862] a conscious humility, and curb that indecent, that dangerous pride which frequently puffs up the mind of man, and is the occasion, that, conceiving himself the lord of the universe,

Being placed so high,

He ‘sdains subjection, and thinks one step higher

Would set him high’st.

But let this lord of nature, this sovereign of the universe, call his eyes around and see all other beings emerging into life almost in a state of perfection; let him look on the poor servile dog, and the domestic kitten, within two months of their appearance in the world able to quit the tender parent’s care, and seek their prey, endowed with all the faculties to find and to destroy it. Let him observe the little duckling bursting from the egg, and rushing instantly into an unruly, a destructive element, to pick up food, and taste the joys of living. Let him go farther still, and mark the light, the tender, the seemingly insignificant ephemeron, with a life destined but for some hours continuance, burst from its embrio state in one element, and almost imperceptibly become the inhabitant of another, enabled to rove unlimited, and taste of every pleasure his being will admit of. After even this slight review, let him but turn his eyes back on his own infant state, and see himself “mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms,” unable for a time to find a use even for his very limbs; for a yet longer period of time deprived of the advantages of language, and still much longer under the necessity of aid, and of instruction [Page 863] to form his reasoning faculties, and render him capable of self assistance.

Again, when brought to his maturity and fulness of perfection as to his natural state, how still deficient in every particular both of attack, defence, and sustenance! First, for attack, the lion has his teeth, the bull his horns, the eagle his talons, and the hawk his beak, either to combat with their foes or to destroy their prey:—but what has man? None of all these. Consider him unassisted, he could not stab the sheep, knock down the ox, or combat with the hog, did either

know his weakness or their own power to resist him. With what propriety then do we pray to the Bestower and Disposer of all life to give us our daily Bread!

Next for defence, the horse has his heels, the fox his holes, the calamary can spread a cloud of ink around him, and the torpedo strike with numbness and insensibility the creature which shall dare to touch him. The cat can swell her form to twice its size, and even a little bird distort her figure into such shapes of terror, as shall deter even animals of bulk and power from coming near her nest.—But which of these advantages does man possess? His speed the heavy elephant will overtake; he cannot dig into the earth to hide him from his foe; nor with his firmest frown or fiercest attitude drive back the hungry wolf or half starved tyger. [Page 864]

Then for his sustenance, the crocodile can change his form, and the camelion his colour, the spider spread a web, and the polypus expand a net, to allure and to entrap their prey: but man, unaided by the means of art, and of a thousand substances not any way appertaining<sup>3</sup> to himself, might starve in the midst of plenty, and daily suffer the fabled fate of Tantalus, to see perpetually before him the greatest delicacies without being able to procure or to enjoy them.

What deductions then may be drawn from these observations? Evidently the two following, with which we shall terminate this discourse: viz. First, that whatever we may imagine of ourselves, and of our self-applied superiority, it must, if it has existence at all, be owing to the favour of that omnipotent Being, who was equally the creator of all other creatures as of ourselves; and that therefore, instead of harbouring an unbecoming pride on the possession of the peculiar gift of reason, which supplies, in one single property, all the deficiencies I have been just mentioning, we ought assuredly to be inspired with the utmost humility united to gratitude, when we consider ourselves as selected out to enjoy that blessing from amidst such an infinite variety of his other works, every one of which appears to have an equal, and many of them even a higher claim to that most desirable preference:—and secondly, that since in natural advantages many even of the lowest and most insignificant beings seem greatly [Page 865] to excel us, there certainly must be some other part of us, some more intellectual and immaterial part belonging to us, in which our superiority must necessarily consist; to which therefore we ought to pay a more particular attention; and on the cultivation and improvement of which must wholly depend every essential view of happiness both in our present state and that which is to come.

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<sup>3</sup> Pertaining