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## The Sketch

### Introduction

Man is born with the ability to receive sensations; to perceive them and to distinguish between the various simple sensations of which they are composed; to remember, recognise and combine them; to compare these combinations; to apprehend what they have in common and the ways in which they differ; to attach signs to them all in order to recognise them more easily and to allow for the ready production of new combinations.

This faculty is developed in him through the action of external objects, that is to say, by the occurrence of certain composite sensations whose constancy or coherence in change are independent of him; through communication with other beings like himself; and finally through various artificial methods which these first developments have led him to invent.

Sensations are attended by pleasure or pain; and man for his part has the capacity to transform such momentary impressions into permanent sentiments of an agreeable or disagreeable character, and then to experience these sentiments when he either observes or recollects the pleasures and pains of other sentient beings.

Finally, as a consequence of this capacity and of his ability to form and combine ideas, there arise between him and his fellow creatures ties of interest and duty, to which nature herself has wished to attach the most precious portion of our happiness and the most painful of our ills.

If one confines oneself to the study and observation of the general facts and laws about the development of these faculties, considering only what is common to all human beings, this science is called metaphysics. But if one studies this development as it manifests itself in the

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inhabitants of a certain area at a certain period of time and then traces it on from generation to generation, one has the picture of the progress of the human mind. This progress is subject to the same general laws that can be observed in the development of the faculties of the individual, and it is indeed no more than the sum of that development realised in a large number of individuals joined together in society. What happens at any particular moment is the result of what has happened at all previous moments, and itself has an influence on what will happen in the future.

So such a picture is historical, since it is a record of change and is based on the observation of human societies throughout the different stages of their development. It ought to reveal the order of this change and the influence that each moment exerts upon the subsequent moment, and so ought also to show, in the modifications that the human species has undergone, ceaselessly renewing itself through the immensity of the centuries, the path that it has followed, the steps that it has made towards truth or happiness.

Such observations upon what man has been and what he is today, will instruct us about the means we should employ to make certain and rapid the further progress that his nature allows him still to hope for.

Such is the aim of the work that I have undertaken, and its result will be to show by appeal to reason and fact that nature has set no term to the perfection of human faculties; that the perfectibility of man is truly indefinite; and that the progress of this perfectibility, from now onwards independent of any power that might wish to halt it, has no other limit than the duration of the globe upon which nature has cast us. This progress will doubtless vary in speed, but it will never be reversed as long as the earth occupies its present place in the system of the universe, and as long as the general laws of this system produce neither a general cataclysm nor such changes as will deprive the human race of its present faculties and its present resources.

The first stage of civilisation observed amongst human beings is that of a small society whose members live by hunting and fishing, and know only how to make rather crude weapons and household utensils and to build or dig for themselves a place in which to live, but are already in possession of a language with which to communicate their needs, and a small number of moral ideas which serve as common laws of conduct; living in families, conforming to general customs which take the place of laws, and even possessing a crude system of government.

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The uncertainty of life, the difficulty man experiences in providing for his needs, and the necessary cycle of extreme activity and total idleness do not allow him the leisure in which he can indulge in thought and enrich his understanding with new combinations of ideas. The means of satisfying his needs are too dependent on chance and the seasons to encourage any occupation whose progress might be handed down to later generations, and so each man confines himself to perfecting his own individual skill and talent.

Thus, the progress of the human species was necessarily very slow; it could move forward only from time to time when it was favoured by exceptional circumstances. However, we see hunting, fishing and the natural fruits of the earth replaced as a source of subsistence by food obtained from animals that man domesticates and that he learns to keep and to breed. Later, a primitive form of agriculture developed; man was no longer satisfied with the fruits or plants that he came across by chance, but learnt to store them, to collect them around his dwelling, to sow or plant them, and to provide them with favourable conditions under which they could spread.

Property, which at first was limited to the animals that a man killed, his weapons, his nets and his cooking utensils, later came to include his cattle and eventually was extended to the earth that he won from its virgin state and cultivated. On the death of the owner this property naturally passed into the hands of his family, and in consequence some people came to possess a surplus that they could keep. If this surplus was absolute, it gave rise to new needs; but if it existed only in one commodity and at the same time there was a scarcity of another, this state of affairs naturally suggested the idea of exchange, and from then onwards, moral relations grew in number and increased in complexity. A life that was less hazardous and more leisured gave opportunities for meditation or, at least, for sustained observation. Some people adopted the practice of exchanging part of their surplus for labour from which they would then be absolved. In consequence there arose a class of men whose time was not wholly taken up in manual labour and whose desires extended beyond their elementary needs. Industry was born; the arts that were already known, were spread and perfected; as men became more experienced and attentive, quite casual information suggested to them new arts; the population grew as the means of subsistence became less dangerous and precarious; agriculture, which could support a greater number of people on the same amount of

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land, replaced the other means of subsistence; it encouraged the growth of the population and this, in its turn, favoured progress; acquired ideas were communicated more quickly and were perpetuated more surely in a society that had become more sedentary, more accessible and more intimate. Already, the dawn of science had begun to break; man revealed himself to be distinct from the other species of animals and seemed no longer confined like them to a purely individual perfection.

As human relations increased in number, scope and complexity, it became necessary to have a method of communicating with those who were absent, of perpetuating the memory of an event with greater precision than that afforded by oral tradition, of fixing the terms of an agreement with greater certainty than that assured by the testimony of witnesses, and of registering in a more enduring manner those respected customs according to which the members of a single society had agreed to regulate their conduct. So the need for writing was felt, and writing was invented. It seems to have been at first a truly pictorial system of representation, but this gave way to a more conventional representation which preserved merely the characteristic features of objects. Finally, by a sort of metaphor analogous to that which had already been introduced into language, the image of a physical object came to express moral ideas. The origin of these signs, like that of words, was ultimately forgotten, and writing became the art of attaching a conventional sign to every idea, to every word, and so by extension, to every modification of ideas and words.

And so mankind had both a written and spoken language, both of which had to be learnt and between which an equivalence had to be established.

Certain men of genius, humanity's eternal benefactors, whose names and country are forever buried in oblivion, observed that all the words of a language were nothing but the combinations of a very limited number of primary sounds, but that their number, though very limited, was enough to form an almost limitless number of different combinations. They devised the notion of using visible signs to designate not the ideas or the words that corresponded to ideas, but the simple elements of which words are composed. And here we have the origin of the alphabet; a small number of signs sufficed to write everything, just as a small number of sounds sufficed to say everything. The written language was the same as the spoken language; all that was necessary was to know how to recognise and reproduce these few signs, and this final step assured the progress of the human race for ever.

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Perhaps it would be useful today to invent a written language that, reserved exclusively for the sciences, expressing only the combinations of those simple ideas which are the same for every mind, and used only for the reasoning of strict logic, for the precise and calculated operations of the understanding would be understood by the people of every country and could be translated into every vernacular and would not have to be altered, as happens now, when it passed into general use.

So by a strange revolution this type of writing, whose survival would only then have helped to prolong ignorance, would now become, in the hands of philosophy, a useful tool for the swift propagation of enlightenment and for the perfection of scientific method.

All peoples whose history is recorded fall somewhere between our present degree of civilisation and that which we still see amongst savage tribes; if we survey in a single sweep the universal history of peoples we see them sometimes making fresh progress, sometimes plunging back into ignorance, sometimes surviving somewhere between these extremes or halted at a certain point, sometimes disappearing from the earth under the conqueror's heel, mixing with the victors or living on in slavery, or sometimes receiving knowledge from some more enlightened people in order to transmit it in their turn to other nations, and so welding an uninterrupted chain between the beginning of historical time and the century in which we live, between the first peoples known to us and the present nations of Europe.

So the picture that I have undertaken to sketch falls into three distinct parts.

In the first, our information is based on the tales that travellers bring back to us about the state of the human race among the less civilised peoples, and we have to conjecture the stages by which man living in isolation or restricted to the kind of association necessary for survival, was able to make the first steps on a path whose destination is the use of a structured language. This is the most important distinction and indeed, apart from a few more extensive ideas of morality and the feeble beginnings of social order, the only one separating man from the animals who like him live in a regular and continuous society. We are therefore in this matter forced to rely upon theoretical observations about the development of our intellectual and moral faculties.

In order to carry the history of man up to the point where he practises certain arts, where knowledge of the sciences has already begun to enlighten him, where trade unites the nations and where, finally,

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alphabetical writing is invented, we can add to this first guide the history of the different societies which have been observed in all their intermediary stages, although none can be traced back far enough to enable us to bridge the gulf which separates these two great eras of the human race.

Here the picture begins to depend in large part on a succession of facts transmitted to us in history, but it is necessary to select them from the history of different peoples, to compare them and combine them in order to extract the hypothetical history of a unique people and to compose the picture of its progress.

The history of man from the time when alphabetical writing was known in Greece to the condition of the human race at the present day in the most enlightened countries of Europe is linked by an uninterrupted chain of facts and observations; and so at this point the picture of the march and progress of the human mind becomes truly historical. Philosophy has nothing more to guess, no more hypothetical surmises to make; it is enough to assemble and order the facts and to show the useful truths that can be derived from their connections and from their totality.

When we have shown all this, there will remain one last picture for us to sketch: that of our hopes, and of the progress reserved for future generations, which the constancy of the laws of nature seems to assure them. It will be necessary to indicate by what stages what must appear to us today a fantastic hope ought in time to become possible, and even easily realised; to show why, in spite of the transitory successes of prejudice and the support that it receives from the corruption of governments or peoples, truth alone will obtain a lasting victory; we shall demonstrate how nature has joined together indissolubly the progress of knowledge and that of liberty, virtue and respect for the natural rights of man; and how these, the only real goods that we possess, though so often separated that they have even been held to be incompatible, must on the contrary become inseparable from the moment when enlightenment has attained a certain level in a number of nations, and has penetrated throughout the whole mass of a great people whose language is universally known and whose commercial relations embrace the whole area of the globe. Once such a close accord had been established between all enlightened men, from then onwards all will be the friends of humanity, all will work together for its perfection and its happiness.

We shall reveal the origin and trace the history of those widespread errors which have somewhat retarded or suspended the progress of

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reason and which have, as often as forces of a political character, even caused man to fall back into ignorance.

The operations of the understanding that lead us into error or hold us there, from the subtle parallogism which can deceive even the most enlightened of men to the dreams of a madman, belong no less than the methods of right reasoning or of discourse to the theory of the development of our individual faculties; on the same principle, the way in which general errors are insinuated amongst peoples and are propagated, transmitted and perpetuated is all part of the historical picture of the progress of the human mind. Like the truths that perfect and illuminate it, they are the necessary consequences of its activity and of the disproportion that forever holds between what it knows, what it wishes to know and what it believes it needs to know.

It can even be observed that, according to the general laws of the development of our faculties, certain prejudices have necessarily come into being at each stage of our progress, but they have extended their seductions or their empire long beyond their due season, because men retain the prejudices of their childhood, their country and their age long after they have discovered all the truths necessary to destroy them.

Finally, in all countries at all times there are different prejudices varying with the standard of education of the different classes of men and their professions. The prejudices of philosophers harm the progress of truth; those of the less enlightened classes retard the propagation of truths already known; those of certain eminent or powerful professions place obstacles in truth's way: here we see three enemies whom reason is obliged to combat without respite, and whom she vanquishes often only after a long and painful struggle. The history of these struggles, of the birth, triumph and fall of prejudices will occupy a great part of this work and will be neither the least important nor the least useful section of it.

If there is to be a science for predicting the progress of the human race, for directing and hastening it, the history of the progress already achieved must be its foundation.

Philosophy has had to proscribe in no uncertain terms that superstition which believes that rules of conduct can be found only in the history of past centuries, and truth only in the study of ancient opinions. But ought it not to condemn with equal vigour the prejudice that arrogantly rejects the lessons of experience? Without doubt it is only by meditation, which furnishes us with fruitful combinations of ideas, that we can arrive at any general truths in the science of man. But if the study of individual human

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beings is useful to the metaphysician and the moralist, why should the study of societies be any less useful to them and to the political philosopher. If it is useful to observe the various societies that exist side by side, and to study the relations between them, why should it not also be useful to observe them across the passage of time? Even if we suppose that these observations can be neglected in the search for speculative truths, ought they to be ignored when it is a question of applying these truths in practice and of deducing from science the art which should be its useful result? Do not our prejudices and the evils that proceed from them have their origins in the prejudices of our ancestors? Is not one of the most certain ways of undeceiving ourselves from the one and of guarding ourselves against the other, to study their origins and their effects?

Are we now at the stage when we have nothing further to fear, neither new errors nor the return of old ones; when no corrupting institution can any longer be devised by hypocrisy, and adopted by ignorance or enthusiasm; when no evil combination can any longer ruin a great nation? Would it then be useless to know how in the past nations have been deceived, corrupted or plunged into misery?

Everything tells us that we are now close upon one of the great revolutions of the human race. If we wish to learn what to expect from it and to procure a certain guide to lead us in the midst of its vicissitudes, what could be more suitable than to have some picture of the revolutions that have gone before it and prepared its way? The present state of enlightenment assures us that this revolution will have a favourable result, but is not this only on condition that we know how to employ our knowledge and resources to their fullest extent? And in order that the happiness that it promises may be less dearly bought, that it may be diffused more rapidly over a greater area, that it may be more complete in its effects, do we not need to study the history of the human spirit to discover what obstacles we still have to fear and what means are open to us of surmounting them?

I shall divide the area that I propose to cover into nine great stages and in a tenth I shall venture to offer some observations on the future destiny of the human race.

I shall confine myself here to presenting the main features that characterise each of these stages; I shall deal only with the outlines, and not stop to mention exceptions or details.

I shall point out the subjects and the conclusions; the work itself will offer further developments and proofs.



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### The first epoch

#### *Men are united in tribes*

Tribal society is the first stage in human history about which we have any direct observation; and, therefore, if we wish to conjecture how man arrived at this degree of civilisation, we can do so only by examining his intellectual and moral qualities and his physical constitution.

A few observations about the physical qualities of man that might have favoured the original formation of society, and a brief analysis of the development of our intellectual and moral faculties would, then, be appropriate as an introduction to the picture of this stage.

A family society seems to be natural to man. Its origin is to be found in the child's need for its parents and in the natural solicitude of the mother and – though to a lesser extent – of the father for their offspring. But the child's need lasts long enough to bring into existence and foster a desire to perpetuate this life together and to awaken a lively sense of its advantages. A family that lived in a region offering ready means of subsistence could increase and become a tribe.

Those tribes which arose as a result of the association of several separate families represent a later and less common phenomenon, since associations of this sort are prompted by motives of less urgency and depend upon the concurrence of a greater number of circumstances.

The first fruits of continuous association are a number of arts, all concerned with the satisfaction of simple needs. They include the making of weapons, cooking and the construction of the utensils necessary for cooking, preserving food and providing against those times of the year when fresh supplies are unobtainable: it is these arts that first serve to distinguish human society from that formed by various species of animals.

In some of these tribes the women grew edible plants around their huts and these supplemented the produce of hunting and fishing. In others which lived where the earth in its natural state supplied vegetation that can be eaten, the finding and gathering of this food occupied part of the time of these primitive peoples. In these latter cases where the advantages of association were less obvious, we find civilisation reduced almost to the simple family society. However, the use of structured language seems universal.

More frequent and stable intercourse between people, the identity of their interests, and the help that they gave one another in communal hunting and defence against an enemy must have produced in equal

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measure the sentiment of justice and mutual affection between the members of the same society. Soon this affection developed into an attachment to the society itself: and this, in its turn, gave rise to violent hatred of the enemies of the tribe and an inextinguishable thirst for revenge.

The tribe needed to act in concert for the purpose of self-defence or to facilitate the task of acquiring more assured and more abundant means of subsistence. And this situation, which created the necessity for a leader, introduced the first ideas of political authority into these societies. In all matters of common interest which called for a common decision, all those who were expected to execute the decision had to be consulted. Women who were prevented from taking part in long expeditions and war because of their weakness were by the same token excluded from the general councils, which usually had to do with such matters. As their decisions required experience, only those were admitted to consultations who might be assumed to have it. Any disagreement arising within the bosom of a single society would disturb its harmony and might even bring about its destruction; and so it was natural that decisions should become the responsibility of those who by reason of their age or personal qualities inspired the greatest confidence.

Such were the beginnings of political institutions.

The formation of language must have preceded these institutions. The idea of expressing objects by conventional signs may seem above the reach of human intelligence at this stage of civilisation, but it is likely that such signs were introduced into common use as the work of time, by degrees, almost imperceptibly.

The invention of the bow was the work of a single man of genius, the formation of language was that of the whole society. These two kinds of progress are equally characteristic of human genius. The one, more swift in its operation, is the result of new combinations of ideas that men favoured by nature are able to form, it is the prize of their meditations and their efforts; the other, a slower process, is born of the reflections and observations that offer themselves to all men and even from the habits that they contract in the course of their life together.

Measured and regular movements can be performed with less fatigue; and their order and arrangement can be understood more easily by those who watch or listen to them. They are for these two reasons a source of pleasure. And thus it is that we can trace the origin of the dance, of music, and of poetry to the early infancy of society. The dance is employed for the entertainment of the young and on occasions of public rejoicing. We