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IV.

THE NEW AND OLD CONCEPTIONS OF KNOWLEDGE.

TO THE EDITOR OF "THE TIMES."

SIR,—Will you allow me to take up my parable again, not as one who sits in the seats of the learned, but rather as that unduly privileged person, the looker-on? True, discrimination is required for the performance of even his lowly and casual function, but what the writer may lack in this respect the reader will supply.

I have ventured to advance that "knowledge" is undefined and probably undefinable; that, it is a state out of which persons may pass and into which they may return, but never a store upon which they may draw; that knowledge-hunger is as universal as bread-hunger; that our best provision for conveying knowledge is marvellously successful with the best men, but rather futile with the second best; that persons whose education has not enriched them with knowledge store up information (statistics and other facts), upon which they use their reasoning powers; that the attempt to reason without knowledge is disastrous; and that, during the present distress, England is, for various economical reasons, in a condition of intellectual inanition consequent upon a failure in her food supply, in this case the supply of food proper for the mind. I have glanced at Knowledge under the three headings suggested by one who speaks with authority, and have contended that, even if knowledge be divisible, the vehicle by which it is carried is one and indivisible, and that it is generally impossible for the mind to receive knowledge except through the channel of letters.

But the mediæval mind had, as we know, a more satisfactory conception of knowledge than we have arrived at. Knowledge is for us a thing of shreds and patches, knowledge of this and of that, with yawning gaps between. The Hebrew had a more

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august conception; I shall venture to quote further from a typical passage to which I referred in my last letter:—

"Doth the ploughman plow all day to sow? Doth he open and break the clods of his ground? When he hath made plain the face thereof, doth he not cast abroad the fitches, and scatter the cumin, and cast in the principal wheat and the appointed barley and the rie in their place? For his God doth instruct him to discretion and doth teach him."

The scholastic mediæval mind, probably working on the scattered hints which the Scriptures offer, worked out a sublime *Filosofica della Religione Cattolica*, pictured, for example, in the great fresco painted by Simoni [sic] Memmi and Taddeo Gaddi (which Ruskin has taught us to know), and implied in "The Adoration of the Lamb" painted by the two Van Eycks. In the first picture we get a Pentecostal Descent, first, upon the cardinal virtues and the Christian graces, then, upon prophets and apostles, and below these, upon the seven Liberal Arts, represented each by its captain figure, Cicero, Aristotle, Zoroaster, etc., none of them Christian, not one of them a Hebrew. Here we get the magnificent idea that all knowledge (undebased) comes from above and is conveyed to minds which are, as Coleridge says,

previously prepared to receive it; and, further, that it comes to a mind so prepared, without question as to whether it be the mind of pagan or Christian; a truly liberal catholic idea, it seems to me, corresponding marvellously with the facts of life. As sublime and even more explicit is the Promethean fable which informed the Greek mind. With the sense of a sudden plunge we come down to our own random and ineffectual notions, and are tempted to cry with Wordsworth:—

“Great God! I’d rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn,”

and know that a God had brought gifts of knowledge to men at awful cost, than to sit serene in the vague belief that knowledge arrives in incoherent particles, no one knows how and no one knows whence; or that it is self-generated in a man here and there who gets out of himself new insight into the motions of mind and heart, a new perception of the laws of life, the hint of a new amelioration in the condition of men.

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Because the notion that we entertain of knowledge as being heterogeneous lies at the root of our heterogeneous theories of education, it may be as well to quote a passage from Ruskin’s description of that picture in the chapel of the Church of Santa Maria Novella to which I have referred:—

“. . . . On this side and the opposite side of the Chapel are represented by Simon Memmi’s hand, the teaching power of the Spirit of God and the saving power of the Christ of God in the world according to the understanding of Florence in his time.

“We will take the side of intellect first. Beneath the pouring forth of the Holy Spirit in the point of the arch beneath are the three Evangelical Virtues. Without these, says Florence, you can have no science. Without Love, Faith, and Hope—no intelligence. Under these are the four Cardinal Virtues. . . . Temperance, Prudence, Justice, Fortitude. Under these are the great Prophets and Apostles. . . . Under the line of Prophets, as powers summoned by their voices are the mythic figures of the seven theological or spiritual and the seven geological or natural sciences; and under the feet of each of them the figure of its Captain-teacher to the world.” (*Mornings in Florence.*)

That is, the Florentines of the Middle Ages believed in “the teaching power of the Spirit of God,” believed not only that the seven Liberal Arts were fully under the direct outpouring of the Holy Ghost, but that every fruitful idea, every original conception, be it in geometry, or grammar, or music, was directly derived from a Divine source.

Whether we receive it or not, and the Scriptures abundantly support such a theory regarding the occurrence of knowledge, we cannot fail to perceive that here we have a harmonious and ennobling scheme of education and philosophy. It is a pity that the exigencies of his immediate work prevented Ruskin from inquiring further into the origin, the final source, of knowledge, but we may continue the inquiry for ourselves. In “the teaching power of the Spirit of God” we have a pregnant and inspiring phrase. Supposing that we accept this mediæval philosophy tentatively for present relief, what would be our gains?

First, the enormous relief afforded by a sense of unity of purpose, of progressive evolution, in the education of the race. It induces great ease of mind to think that knowledge is dealt out to us according to our preparedness and according to our needs; that God whispers in the ear of the man who is ready

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in order that he may be the vehicle to carry the new knowledge to the rest of us. "God has a few of us whom He whispers in the ear": Abt Vogler is made to say, and another poet causes his Explorer to cry:—

"God chose me for his whisper, and I've found it, and it's yours!"

Next, that knowledge, in this light, is no longer sacred and secular, great and trivial, practical and theoretical. All knowledge, dealt out to us in such portions as we are ready for, is sacred; knowledge is, perhaps, a beautiful whole, a great unity, embracing God and man and the universe, but having many parts which are not comparable with one another in the sense of less or more, because all are necessary and each has its functions. Next, we perceive that knowledge and the mind of man are to each other as are air and the lungs. The mind lives by means of knowledge; stagnates, faints, perishes, deprived of this necessary atmosphere.

That, it is not for a man to choose, "I will learn this or that, the rest is not my concern"; still less is it for parent or schoolmaster to limit a child to less than he can get at of the whole field of knowledge; for, in the domain of the mind at least as much as in that of morals or religion, man is under a Divine Master; he has to know as he has to eat.

That, there is not one period of life, our school days, in which we sit down to regular meals of intellectual diet, but that we must eat every day in order to live every day.

That, knowledge and what is known as "learning" are not to be confounded; learning may still be an available store when it is not knowledge; but by knowledge one grows, becomes more of a person, and that is all that there is to show for it. We sometimes wonder at the simplicity and modesty of persons whose knowledge is matter of repute; but they are not hiding their light; they are not aware of any unusual possessions; they have nothing to show but themselves, but we feel the force of their personalities. Now, forceful personalities, persons of weight and integrity, of decision and sound judgment, are what the country is most in need of; and, if we propose to bring such persons up for the public service, the gradual inception of knowledge is one condition amongst others.

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SOME MODERN REMEDIES.

There are various delightfully "new" educational systems in favour, in all of which a grain of knowledge is presented in a gallon of warm diluent. *Punch's* "Miss Honeyman" is a case in point; but, even if Jemmy and Jenny had known which was Alfred and which was the cakes, the "dramatic method," good as affording an occasional game, is a huge waste of time when serious work is required. Again, we have the theory that it does not matter what a child learns, but only how he learns it; which is as sound as, It does not matter what a child eats, but only how he eats it, therefore feed him on sawdust! Then, we have Rousseau's primitive-man theory, that a child must get all his knowledge through his own senses and by his own wits, as if

there were no knowledge waiting to be passed on by the small torch-bearer; and there is the theory which obtained in Catholic England, exemplified in more than one of the Waverley Novels, in the sports purveyed for her tenantry by Lady Margaret Bellenden, for example. Those men and maidens had been trained as children to be “supple, active, healthy, with senses alert, ready for dance and song, with an eye and ear ready for the beautiful, intelligent, happy, capable.” (I quote from a recent valuable letter in *The Times*.) What with our morris-dances, pageants, living pictures, miracle plays, and so on, we are reviving the Stuart educational ideals, and no doubt we do well to aim at increasing the general joy. But our age requires more of us; in the sort of self-activity and self-expression implied in these and in half a dozen other educational theories, knowledge plays no part, and the city *gamin* exhibits in perfection every quality of gaiety, alert intelligence, delight in shows, which we set ourselves to cultivate.

“With all thy getting, get understanding,” is the message for our needs, and understanding is, in one sense, the conscious act of the mind in apprehending knowledge, which is in fact relative, and does not exist for any person until that person’s mind acts upon the intellectual matter presented to it. “Why will ye not understand?” is the repeated and poignant question of the Gospels.

That is what ails us as a nation, we do not understand: not working people only, but educated men and women,
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employ fallacious arguments, offer prejudices for principles, and platitudes for ideas. If it be argued that these failures are due less to ignorance than to insincerity, I should reply that insincerity is an outcome of ignorance; the darkened intelligence cannot see clearly.

A review in *The Times Literary Supplement* (for April 11th) comes to my aid:—“The note of modern Germany Lord Haldane finds in the fact that, while its spirit is highly concrete and practical, it is based on foundations of abstract knowledge;” “orderliness” (says Lord Haldane), “becomes easy when first principles are clearly defined.” Mr. Herford again, in the volume under review (*Germany in the Nineteenth Century*) speaks of “the peculiarly important part played by abstract thought in the making of modern Germany.” We English have an uneasy admiration for Germany as a nation which has worked out its own salvation on certain philosophic principles; it would be fatal and futile for us to take what the Irishman calls the “bottle” prescribed for a neighbour. Our constitution is not his nor are our ailments identical; but we also must look for our panacea to abstract knowledge; the difference may happily prove to be that we shall investigate further into the source of knowledge and apply the remedy with a more adequate conception of first principles. “The day is unto them that know,” but knowledge is by no means the facile acquirement of those who, according to Ruskin, “cram to pass and not to know”; and who “do pass and do not know.”

I would not be understood as venturing to pass strictures upon the vast and excellent educational work we are doing; it is impossible to go into an elementary school without being impressed by the competence of the teachers and the intelligence of the children; I have already paid a worthless tribute to public schools, and should like here to add a word of affectionate and hearty appreciation of the high school girl as I know her—a person quite undeserving of the slings and arrows of outrageous criticism too freely aimed at her. As for our new universities, they remove the stigma under which many of us have suffered in presence of

the numerous centres of intellectual life which add dignity and grace to continental cities. The new universities are full of promise for the land.

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We have, no doubt, arrived at a good starting place, but we may not consider that the journey is accomplished. I need not repeat the charges to which we have laid ourselves open because of our ignorance, but perhaps in future letters I may be allowed to take a closer survey of the field of education as regarded from the standpoint of knowledge and the innate affinities existing in the mind with that knowledge which is proper for it. For the present my desire is that "abstract knowledge" should present itself to practical persons as the crying demand of the nation; the "mandate," let us say, pronounced by certain general failures to understand the science of relations, and that other neglected form of knowledge, "the science of the proportion of things."

I am, yours etc.,

CHARLOTTE M. MASON.