The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by Edward C. Hegeler

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ARGUMENTA AB AMORE ET INVIDIA DUCTA.

BY HENRY BRADFORD SMITH.

"For, of a truth, Love and Strife were aforetime and shall be; nor ever, methinks, will boundless time be emptied of that pair."
—Burnet's translation of the Fragments of Empedocles.

EMERSON once remarked, on the occasion of addressing one of Professor Child's classes at Cambridge, "Gentlemen, in twenty years the ranking list will be inverted,"—the last shall be first and the first last. Emerson, you will say, was not the man to give expression to this truth, if truth it be, for he had graduated well down in the list of his classmates. The circumstance of his remark was further aggravated by the fact that Professor Child had himself taken all the junior honors within the reach of even the most extraordinary student.

There are at least three ways in which the scientist might test the validity of the Emersonian law. He might settle the matter sociologically by an appeal to statistical information. Or he might seek a psychological explanation. He might observe that white children of a certain age placed in the school-room with children of other races are far outdistanced by the latter; but that if the two groups were observed together at a later date it might be found that the positive difference first observed had not only vanished but had been reversed. And so it might be with college students. A man whose mental maturity is complete at twenty has no serious competitor in the man whose full powers have only begun to unfold themselves a decade later. Finally, the scientist might seek the deeper *raison d'etre* among the facts of biology. He observes, for example, that the individual with the greater potentialities realizes these potentialities at the slower rate.

I have tried to give to Emerson's clever remark a certain verisimilitude, because I should like it to be granted for the moment that, in spite of the fact that he is prejudiced in its favor, he may yet have hit upon something like the truth. In point of fact, which of the two men, Emerson or Professor Child, would be the more likely to discover the truth, the one prejudiced at the outset in its favor, or the one who would naturally be set against it from the beginning? I am, in fact, about to attempt "in the teeth of general fame" a sort of justification of prejudice. I am going to attempt, as it were, an apology not only for the human value of human prejudice but in particular a defense of its scientific value as well. The truth just considered, if it be a statistical result, will not of necessity be verified in all of its applications. The case of Emerson would certainly be one that would bear it out; but Smith or Brown or Jones, if predisposed in its favor, might equally well discover it, even if their own cases represented exceptions to the rule. Here, then, the desire that something should be true would facilitate its discovery.

The pathway of science is strewn with illustrations that point the same moral. Had the Babylonians not believed that the stars of heaven controlled the high matters of human destiny they would never have found the patience, century on century, to record their observations; and Hellenism, one of the few sporadic attempts of man to surpass man, that renaissance of the oriental world, would have inherited no science upon which to build. Modern chemistry owes its present advancement in no small part to the persistent efforts of the alchemist to transmute the baser metals into gold, and the misguided attempt of the geometer to square the circle by the aid of rule and compass alone has left its mark on the science and furnished the clue to the discovery of unsuspected truths. If the world in which we find ourselves provokes our curiosity, it is because we build it up out of those aspects of reality that interest us. "Nothing has been accomplished in the world," says Hegel, "without interest, and, if interest be called passion, we may affirm that nothing great has been brought about in the world without passion on the part of the actors." But it is important to remark that the truth which beckons is not always the one finally verified, just as the benefit sought is rarely the one accepted in the end. The law of conservation of energy followed on the search for perpetual motion, and more wealth has flowed from the applications of chemistry than the alchemist could well have dreamed.

The intellectual crank is not altogether admirable and most of us entertain a normal dislike for the qualities that make him up. If we are not shrewd enough to put a finger on the mental screws that are loose in him, it is easy to fall back upon his social eccentricities. The world of Dante, with the earth at the centre of the universe and the seven heavens encircling it, with Jerusalem at the top and the mountain of Purgatory, displaced by Satan, as he plunged down from the Empyrean, at the bottom, was of course a normal conception for him. The astronomical crank of his day would be the man who espoused, as against this geocentric conception, the eccentric opinion that the universe is heliocentric at bottom, the evidence of our senses to the contrary notwithstanding. A man who could soberly express such views would be capable of inventing other absurdities and it was the custom of that day to put him quietly out of the way "without the shedding of blood." The majority of men has always insisted upon its inalienable right to deal as it sees fit with the "abnormal" minority which strays too far from the norm.

As all the world knows there is an ocean of humbug which circulates as current opinion and which passes unrebuked. Only this morning a contributor writes to a column of my morning newspaper: "In all the pros and cons set forth in the daylight controversy I have never yet seen advanced the thought that it must have an influence toward weakening the regard for truth in the young. Why do we want to teach and uphold the camouflaging of natural facts?" This person, you will say, ought to be burned at the stake in the interest of truth. But his view is based upon an ignorance that is generally shared. Its author gets off scot free because he stands with his majority. What is the human value of such a prejudice however universal and consequently human it may be? But,—it is so, the answer is simple enough. The opinion in question could never have been set down, if the author had ever consciously and habitually distinguished between natural fact, which is resistant to man's whim that it be otherwise, and human convention, which may be altered at will. Cap and bells, as so often before, has raised a philosophic question, has raised in effect a whole nest of difficulties. Let him continue to speak in your imagination. "Truth, yes truth, a fine word! But is there, then, an absolute truth, which accordingly demands an absolute respect? And, if truth be only relative, who then will designate the relative respect which is its due? And the young! How far may we dare to initiate

them in the mystery of truth while they are still young? Just how much does one's own infallibility weight in the balance against the infallibility of another " Decidedly, every morsel of simon-pure crankism serves its purpose if one may only divine the cosmic intent. The reiteration of banalities destroys the force of their meaning, and the selective as opposed to the acquisitive memory tends to slough them off and they drift towards their proper fate among the clouds of forgetfulness. One does not pursue the obvious for it waits upon his coming. It will still be there when he returns. The truth about nature loves to hide, said Heracleitus. You must catch it in its passage, because it is fleeting and rare. The instinct to collect butterflies is deeper than the collector's instinct.

No belief has a firmer seat in the mind of the day-to-day scientist than the one which says that the order of nature is independent of our human desires. Needless to say this attitude of mind is not one that has always been in the world. Springing up along side of the anthropomorphic and the anthropocentric conception of nature, it has made its way in face of the gravest difficulties and only after centures of effort is its victory finally assured. That such a prejudice has been of priceless value to human progress will not have to be urged upon any mind that is well informed and the proof lies in the fact that it will hardly be recognized by anyone as prejudice at all. Nevertheless, stated without limitations, it is strictly untrue.

The belief that the order of nature is independent of our human desires expresses itself in certain of the maxims of scientific procedure. Whenever you desire to settle the truth or the untruth of any general statement about the world, the scientist will tell you, let the matter be put to the test of experiment. Seek not the issue of truth in the inner, but rather in the outer world. This view of the case seems sane enough until you examine it at closer range. Suppose that you inquire how the experimental evidence is to be gathered unless you are furnished beforehand with some hypothesis that you desire to be true, in whose favor you are already prejudiced at the outset. Or suppose you were to ask how the laws of chance could be established experimentally; or what kind of an experiment it would be that would tell us whether the space we inhabit is the Euclidean sort we learned to regard as absolute in school, or the Riemannian kind that we became acquainted with in later life. You may if you ply your scientist with these and similar inquiries compel him finally to admit that there may well be questions of

fact that cannot be answered by any direct appeal to natural facts. Is it not, then, more than possible that some of the basic features of the world may be subject to human choice and that this choice may be made to conform to deep lying human desires? "The heart hath its own reasons," said Pascal, "which are unknown to reason." Thus Riemannian space might be chosen as the space of our habitat for no better reason than that it makes the facts of celestial physics easier for us to grasp or our astronomical calculations easier to perform or even the evolution of living matter a simpler thing to understand. Living organisms have not yet been produced in the laboratory of the scientist but it is certain that they have somehow been created in the laboratory of the world. This may easily be because of some circumstance that operates in nature but remains outside of man's control, such as a difference of potential, or temperature, or pressure, of cosmic magnitude. The creation of life might require the condition of a "curvature" of space demanding stellar distances in which to operate, but inappreciable within the shorter spaces under man's control.

The sphere, in which personal bias plays perhaps its most notably useful and important role, is the writing of history. The "objective" historian, who opposes this view, we shall have with us always, like the rest of the poor in spirit; but his claims are readily exposed. According to this creature we must venture as little as may be beyond the "documents" themselves. We must stand by the *ipsissima verba* at the risk of perverting the truth. If he sticks to his guns,—he is *par excellence* the man who sticks to his dates—history is for him a colorless chronicle, whose only objective character is the "facts" and their chronological order. His task would then be to establish this order "without bias" and his history the documents set side by side. It is obvious from Euclid that his shelves, like the sentences of Kant, would have to be measured by a railroad engineer.

What he does, then, in practice is to foreshorten the picture; not, indeed, by abstractions, the "most trenchant of epitomizers,' for that would be his personal medium operating to pervert the truth; but rather by leaving out of account the unimportant facts, the ones that have no bearing upon the drama in its larger outlines. But see you not, Sir Historiographer, that by this admission the whole humbug about objectivity and the impersonal narrative is exposed? You *choose* the facts. Very well, Sir, and how do you choose them and why? Because they illustrate some general point

of view, which is your own. Because they illuminate some personal insight suggested by your own personal bias and interesting in so far as your imagination is daring, colorful, shrewd and—objective. In this sense history is more than romance and only the poet can be safely entrusted to write it. Alexander Dumas pointed this out long ago but such seeds fall on stony ground. It was the novelist's own habit, when writing of an event, to construct, as the phrase goes, *a priori* all of its parts down to the minutest detail. He surpassed all other men in the range and in the accuracy of his topographical imagination; and whenever he took the trouble to visit the scene of his historical dramas, which he did upon occasion, when the historical accounts contradicted his own, he invariably discovered that he was right and that the historian was wrong. The search for objectivity, like the search for happiness, baffles all stupid folk, who know not how to forego the direct approach.

If it be true that the historian selects those facts which illuminate his private point of view, it is no less true that the facts themselves are amenable to his interpretations. Facts to the unimaginative are hard and fast things but to the spiritually-minded they are plastic. The mind of Plato is an historical fact. Who, then, was Plato? Was this mind best known to the author of the Dialogues? Beyond a doubt to Plato himself some aspects of it were pretty well revealed. But did he know it as it was really constituted? It is warranted that he possessed no such gift. I will wager that his illustrious pupil, Aristotle, knew its defects and its excellencies better than he knew them himself. Or was Plato the mind that was so well known to the scholars of the Renaissance? Each one of these points of view about the fact in question contains a measure of the truth but none is absolute. Round about every historical fact there circles a halo of ambiguity and it is within the limits of this halo that the interpretation of the historian may have free range. The rim of fact is clear-cut only for him who has no magnifying lens at hand.