

On Unlearning.

"O well for him whose will is strong!
 He suffers, but he will not suffer long;
 He suffers, but he cannot suffer wrong."

Tennyson.

"Πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ, κ' οὐδὲν ἀν—
 θρώπου δεινότερον πίλει.

* * *
 καὶ φθίγμα, καὶ ἀνεμόεν
 φρόνημα, καὶ ἀστυνόμους
 ὀργὰς ἐδιδάξατο."

Sophocles.

FROM the earliest period of his history down to the present day man has ever been an object of eager study to himself. Nevertheless it is questionable whether he has yet succeeded in satisfying himself what he really is. "Everything by turns, and nothing long," seems to be the conclusion to which one may most safely come after consideration of the numerous definitions which man has at different times seriously given of himself. He has likened himself to most things on earth, and to not a few under the earth. He has, as it were, dissolved himself, tested, precipitated, dried, and weighed himself; he has frequently lost himself, gone in search of himself, traced himself back to an homunculus, and forward to his final disappearance in a general dissolution of his constituent particles. But after making all these and many other experiments upon himself, whether he is the godlike son of Heaven, or an idealised monkey, he has not yet decided.

Undoubtedly the knowledge of whence man came, or of the mode of his first appearance on this earth, would throw some light on what he is. In the absence of this positive knowledge, however, we must continue to advance by slow steps to the full exposition of the relations of human life. The oracle of old proclaimed it as the highest wisdom to "know thyself." No one questions the excellency of the advice, and, though not knowing how to adopt it, is not backward in urging its acceptance on others. It is as difficult for a man to know himself abstractedly, that is, purely objectively, as it is from a point *within* a sphere to project that sphere. How can a man take a walk round himself, and look at himself on all sides, and handle himself as he would a metal or a crystal? He cannot sever himself from personality. But, given this personality as the constant quantity in man, it is within his power to discover what more than this he is, to examine the various affections of his personality and the manner of

their production. By the power of a carefully trained imagination he may place himself on a stage on which he can, as it were, objectively contemplate the internal states of mind, as in a mirror he contemplates the external features of his countenance. Nothing is more natural, nothing more easy, than to fall into a passion on the occasion of some offence to the personality; but he who by a wise cultivation has acquired the power of regarding his mental states as objective, immediately recognises the absurdity of a passionate ebullition. In the drama wherein he plays, and which is being acted, as it were, before his mind's eye, he sees what a ridiculous figure he cuts when in a fury, and how useless, if not injurious, is the angry waste of force. He may thus philosophise on his feelings, his ideas, and his actions, albeit he is connected with them by his personality. When suffering again some bodily pain which depresses his spirits, giving rise to a feeling of melancholy, he may, whilst experiencing these uneasy mental and bodily sensations, recognise clearly the relationship of the one to the other; and although he cannot divest himself of, or will away, the connection between the sensations and his personality, he can, supposing action of any kind to be possible, will to do with an effort that which he would perhaps have almost unconsciously done with no effort at all, had he been without his bodily ailment. When this can be done, will is said to be supreme; and man is called free.

It will not be denied that self-knowledge and self-culture depend mainly on the will; and that the will is gradually built up in conformity with, and acts at all times in obedience to, law; that it is a faculty which may be notably strengthened by exercise, and pitifully weakened by neglect. Few, however, act up to their belief in this fact; many do not even know it to be a fact. But whether men know or do not know, whether they believe or disbelieve, the laws of nature are just the same. The law of gravitation was as real and inevitable before Sir Isaac Newton's day as it is now. The law by which water finds its own level was as certain when the citizens of Rome, in ignorance of its operation, built at an enormous expense aqueducts over plains, across vallies, and alongside mountains to carry water to its own level, as it is now when the citizens of London apply it at little cost to supply their daily wants. Man discovers laws; he does not invent them. And not less actual or less constant in their operation than the physical laws are those laws which govern man's mental organization, although the many are totally ignorant of them, and the few know them so imperfectly. Nevertheless to be ignorant of them is as expensive to us in every-day life as their ignorance of the law of fluids was to the Romans. Even in what are called the small concerns of life man is not permitted unbridled license to self-determine his actions or his thoughts, ignoring at will the past and capriciously pre-ordaining the future;

his past is the antecedent of which his future is the inevitable consequent. In his greatest achievements he never soars above the all-powerful influence of law, and in the most trivial action of mechanical life he never sinks below that influence: in all life there is no casualty; in everything is causality. As the law which keeps the planets in their course preserves the spherical form of a drop of water; so the law which governs the ambitious soul of him who aspires to conquer empires and subdue nations is manifest in the mental operations of the hero of a dozen fights in the village school-yard. To the truth of this reason readily assents; but it is not easily made an article of practical faith. Man is too apt to confound knowledge with practice. He will talk you philosophy for hours, and give you demonstrations in mental anatomy so plain, that you can perceive the mode of generation and growth of thought. He will explain to you how the presence of bile disturbs the harmonious arrangement of the molecules of your brain, and will, by arguments cogent and elaborate, incite you so to fashion your will as to be able to call up force to frustrate the otherwise inevitable consequences of this confusion. But no sooner does the "atra bilia" introduce discord amongst the peaceful denizens of his skull, than it is made manifest in such words and deeds as prove that when he calls upon his will to help him, "either it is talking, or it is pursuing, or it is in a journey, or peradventure it sleepeth, and must be awaked."

Again, a philosopher in his writings often conveys the impression that he must be a perfect man in life: by no possibility can he be placed at a disadvantage. No occurrence of human origin can happen which he does not at once recognise to be simple and natural: he accepts the inevitable with resignation: he "defies augury" because he feels destiny: it is all one to him, whatever happens. This is the philosopher in his study; but in the street, in the marketplace, in society, he bears no mark to distinguish him from his fellows. Like *Œdipus*, he can solve the Sphinx's riddle, but the riddle of his own life remains inextricable. He does not live his philosophy. He leaves it behind him on his library table, or sends it to the printer. And when it goes forth to the public in the shape of a book with his name on the title page, the world discovers a philosopher where perhaps it least expected to find one.

This obvious contradiction is to a great extent traceable to the fact that man does not understand the laws of his being when he first becomes subject to them. He does not walk upon the stage of life to play his part thereon with all his faculties developed, and with a mind stored with a knowledge of the laws of nature. In his first appearance he sprawls upon the boards a little naked helpless "nothing." And when in the course of time he does attain to some knowledge of physical, moral, intellectual, and spiritual truth—the truth of nature—he has paid a price for it. His mind has been

fashioned for him in early days ; and when he would furnish it with ideas in accordance with his more advanced stage of development, he finds it already in the strong possession of early implanted ideas that have grown with his growth and become stronger with his strength. For the "faculties" of the mind do not, Pallas-like, spring forth at once in full development ; but they are structures gradually built up by years of tedious formation. The conscious acquisitions of education become incorporated as unconscious additions to the powers of the mind ; in reality, therefore, each so-called faculty is not a simple creation, but an infinitely complex formation, the character of which is in great part determined by the character of the education. Thus, then, there is an unconscious life which it is impossible to shake off, and which often in its manifestations takes us by surprise, as well as a conscious life which we voluntarily direct : like warp and woof, the unconscious and the conscious together constitute the web of life. What marvel, then, that there are contradictions not a few, and inconsistencies beyond belief, in the life of a man who aims at self-culture, more even than in that of the man who has never been incited to ask himself for a reason for the hope that is in him and the fear that so frequently hovers over him. There is much to learn and much to unlearn, and the latter is more difficult than the former.

Our mental nature is to a great extent determined by the ideas which have been put into our minds from our earliest infancy up to maturity. The opinions then in fashion we adopted ; the articles of faith then binding we assented to ; the standard of thought then set up we never ventured beyond ; the interpretation of life and nature then given we accepted. As children and youths we are recipients of ideas and opinions, and when we become men we cannot always put away childish things. Hence there are often, as it were, two principles at work in man, drawing him in different directions ; and life is for the most part the expression and exhibition of the conflict between these two principles. The individual is continually struggling to become that which he thinks he ought to be, in opposition to a development which is the natural sequence of that which he has been. Conscious and unconscious nature very frequently do not harmonise, and the actions of man being of necessity the results of one or other of these, there must be in the lives of all except two sects of men flat contradictions. The two consistent classes are, first, those many in whom their first received notions are powerful as instincts, and secondly, those few who are altogether emancipated from them. In the first class is included the majority of mankind whose chrysalis-like being is close enveloped in ideas of the established fashion to which they succeeded by inheritance, and in opinions which they entertain according to precedent. Between this large aggregate of homogeneous atoms and the few, composing

the second class, who have reached the climax of an emancipated evolution, there are necessarily many gradations of development from the individual whose mental system has experienced the first tremulous agitation of a doubt to him who has partially succeeded in establishing harmonious relations between himself and external nature.

From the first step in self-culture—the first question put but not answered, the first unutterable fear, the first indescribable longing,—to the deliberate sifting of a man's practical faith and intellectual convictions by himself, his mind traverses a marvellously varied path. Many of the stages of this journey have been dramatically embodied in literature, but there are still many sequestered nooks and hidden paths which have not yet been represented, so that a man can look upon them as old familiar places. The main road has been traced, and some of the more prominent parts of it have been clearly delineated, but the accurate reproduction of all the varied scenes and minute incidents of that pilgrimage is still wanting; and the psychological world expects in hope another Shakespeare or another Goethe to give an explanation of all the dim mysterious feelings which man experiences from his first consciousness onwards through life, obscure utterances as yet uninterpretable, from the secret depths of a nature which, nevertheless, speaks in such responsive thrills of a deeper, a more fundamental harmony with external nature than has yet been dreamt of in philosophy.

It has been sometimes said that man doeth well to cherish his delusions, but it may be more correctly said that it is well for that man who does not discern his delusion. It is difficult to describe the painful nature of the shock which the mind sustains when first it perceives the sandy foundations on which it has securely rested, unexpectedly shifting away. If suddenly an individual feels that what he cherished as intelligent convictions are but dreaming sentiments, and faces an universe estranged from him, is it marvellous if he becomes possessed of lunatic fancies? A sense of utter desolation overwhelms him; from the whole world bound together by sympathetic ties he alone is a castaway. When the immeasurable universe around him has an aspect of void immensity wherein he can find no rest for the sole of his foot, is there no temptation for that man to give way under the weight of his destiny and to rush anywhere—anywhere out of the world? And if one in whom, owing to a blessed inheritance, self-recovering power is great, waits through nights of fear and days of hope until the germ of a newer and more satisfying communion with the universe comes to perfection, are there not many who fail and whose failures bear witness to the truth that "to be weak is to be miserable?" The shock in the one case arouses into activity dormant force, and raises the individual to a higher stage of development; in the other case paralyses active force, and leaves the

individual a victim to laws which inevitably and yet mercifully extinguish within him the light of Heaven, and consign him to the blackest darkness.

But amongst those with whom nature deals in a milder fashion than with her choicest spirits, and to whom fate, if it apports no laurels, decrees no mighty tasks, there are many grades of development according to their capacities. One man goes on under the influence of his early acquired ideas, without question of any kind, to the end of his days. Supposing him to be an earnest man, he lives his unconsciously acquired philosophy so consistently that one might easily fancy him to be our great grandfather still in the flesh. His ideas are antediluvian, and he has never unlearned a single one: he is, as it were, a petrification of the past. Another man goes on to a late period of life before he begins to look for himself at the facts of the universe, and to take observations from his own stand-point. Then, as may be expected, the domination of acquired ideas and modes of thought over his mind is exceedingly strong, and the difficulty of emancipating himself is very great. Hence arise an unsettled state of mind and an inconsistency of conduct. Incoherency of thought and a want of logical action result from the irregular and unequal influence which his past habits and present views have over his mind: he is, as it were, a mental shuttlecock tossed to and fro from that which has been to that which is. He cannot consciously go on in that which he has unconsciously learnt, yet he cannot rid himself of the influence which his previous mental education has over him. He drifts with the tide as it ebbs and flows. He dares not venture out into the open sea, for as yet he has no compass to steer by.

Again, there is the individual who has schooled himself by persevering self-experimentation, so as to have almost divested himself of the power of feeling. Envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness, are the same to him as love, sympathy, benevolence, and charity. The phenomena of life he looks upon as upon the figures of a picture. Murders, rapines, and suicides, are to him simply objective occurrences with which he concerns himself in the same frame of mind in which he would solve an algebraical problem. He hopes for no joy, and fears no sorrow. His fellow-creatures sink into abject poverty, or smart under the rod of affliction, but no tear moistens his eye. Things unavoidable must be left to take unbewailed their way. They enjoy the favours of fortune, and taste happiness, but no smile of sympathetic gladness lights up his face. In everything he sees only the work of Nature during time; and it is not his business to interfere with that for which he is nowise responsible. The deeds of man are all alike natural facts, whatever be their qualities, and as such he tranquilly observes them, discovering in them processes of evolution, and recognising in their

differences the accidents of individuality. Finding it to be much easier to break than to bend, he has destroyed his feelings, and imagines that he has subjugated them to his will; or it may be said with more correctness that, by repressing any outward manifestation of feeling on objects external to himself, he has proportionably increased the intensity and activity of pure self-feeling and selfishness. Failing to perceive the beauty of character which well regulated feelings confer upon their happy possessor, and ignoring their utility as handmaids of the intellect, he is indeed emancipated from the emotional self, but the chains of the intellectual self hang heavy upon him. Proud of his freedom, although he is frost-bound in ice, he inwardly rejoices that he is not in a state of perpetual thaw as some men are.

Another, again, as soon as he arrives at bodily maturity, when the individual first becomes capable of consciously influencing his own mental development, begins to form himself anew. As in the external relations of life an individual may have been directed, or persuaded, or forced into some calling to which he feels such an uncontrollable antipathy, that he leaves it and adopts another, contrary, perhaps, to the wishes of his friends and also to the maxims of worldly prudence; so in the internal relations of a man's state of mind to his personality, his mental possessions may be inadequate to satisfy, if not wholly repugnant to, his instinctive feeling of, his blind longing for, what is right and true for him. He feels that he must be born again, and straightway commences by the efforts of conscious will to mould his mentality anew. He does not passively permit the irregular influx, or succumb to the multiform influence, of new ideas that enter his mind and abide there, some for a day, some for months, and some for years, like the heterogeneous assembly of unconnected and alien individuals casually brought together in an hotel. He does not fill his mind with the thoughts and ideas of other men, undigested and unassimilated, an unarranged and useless collection of curiosities, which he can neither enjoy himself nor display for the benefit of others. He is not even content with storing his mind with other men's thoughts, even though he arranged them in such order as to be able to lay his hand on each as it is wanted, as is the case with some whose minds are, as Sir James Macintosh's mind was said to be, like closets hung round with other men's coats and hats, any of which they put on as occasion requires. He shuns, as he would poison, the wedding of his personality now to this idea and now to that. He is not on one day the enthusiastic disciple of one master, and on another day of another; knowing that to renounce the service of self, in order to go into unquestioning bondage to the mind of another, is not freedom, but a change of livery. He knows that, as he sees with his own eyes, and hears with his own ears, and not

with another's, so he ought to exercise his own mental faculties, and with his own mental vision look at the universe and what is extraordinary in it, and with his own ears listen to what the voice of nature says to him. She may have a story as old as the stars to tell him, which his ears alone may hear; she may have paintings as ancient as life to show him which his eyes alone can gaze upon. Nature is infinite in variety, inexhaustible in instruction: it is to the blind only that all colours are alike; to the deaf all sounds are indifferent.

But how few are they who deem any self-culture necessary! To all but a very small minority of mankind it seems to be an utter impossibility to conceive that the opinions which they hold, and the system in which they live as respectable units, may not be final and all-sufficient. The world hates originality, or marked individuality of character, precisely because it hates to have its faith disputed and its comfortable indolence disturbed. And yet all reformers, all the world's benefactors, have been men who would not let it rest, but persistently laboured to make its soul disquieted within it. It is in nowise a right assumption, then, to begin with, that because whatever is, is right, therefore it will be right for it to remain as it is; on the contrary, a much truer proposition is that whatever is, is not fixed, but *becomes*. In whatever circumstances of life a man may be placed, he will find obsolete customs which may well be abolished, much esteemed errors which may well be assaulted, newly budding truths which may be encouraged, noble aspirations which may be realised. Each one, therefore, who would rightly do his duty to himself, to his neighbour, and to nature—who will not be a mere *social automaton*—has a great and severe task in unlearning prejudices, in assimilating truths, in a deliberate self-formation with which he can make no indolent compromise, and in which, if he would succeed, he must not be weary of discipline. He is compelled to begin his task by liberating himself, more or less, from the thralldom of a tyrannical past; often by making a clearance in his field of knowledge, so as to reconstruct from the foundation his system of ideas. Nearly all his present mental profession is a confused medley of ideas, opinions, and prejudices, which, so far from being of value to him, is a hindrance to his having clear insight into anything. His dim vision misrepresents to him the forms and aspects of things, and he sees spectres and shadows, and too often hideous fantasies, which make him fearful of nature—just as an imaginative child, whom its nurse has horribly amused with ghost stories, sees ghosts in everything, and is afraid where there is no cause for fear. And even if there has been fortunate guidance from early youth, so that there is an unusual liberality and breadth of mind, and a disposition to receive and examine, still there is much to unlearn before there can be a

sufficiently clear space wherein to lay, broad and deep, the basis of the intellectual fabric; for "the highest understandings are apt to associate their ideas according to the order in which they have been received," and not according to any real affinity betwixt the ideas themselves. The order amongst ideas should be conformable to the order of nature, which it certainly is not whilst man has so unduly exalted an idea of himself, so unjustly low an idea of nature.

Above all things it is necessary that a man do not strive to alienate himself from nature. The highest and most finished culture must bring him back at last to a like intimate congenial relation with external nature, to that which he unconsciously occupied as a child, when he knew not that he was differentiated from it. Who is there who has not strange memories of an inexplicable joy possessing him when, a child alone in the presence of nature, his little heart has throbbed in mysterious unison with the great kindly heart of nature? He, an unconscious part of nature—unaware that he was an *ego*—instinctively felt at home with her as a child with its mother. These mysterious and unintelligible feelings of his childhood are evidences of potentiality within him, which may or may not be hereafter actualised. But the gradually developing understanding, exploring here and there, measuring this and weighing that, subsequently taught him to see in nature only a huge, ingenious, dead mechanism, which he could not love, and with which he could have no sympathy. Then under the impulse of the changed feelings which took the place of his trustful love, he wishes to make nature his slave, and in the pride of his little knowledge boasts of his power. For this estrangement of himself from nature he seeks consolation in the magnifying of his idea of self to such an extent as shall raise it high above his idea of nature. Thence he comes to look upon that which, as a child, he felt carried him in her living arms, as an instrument to be made subservient to him, and to seriously believe, and with gravity assert, that for this his idol self, and this above all things, suns, moons, stars, and worlds are made. Can a mind thick shrouded in the dark folds of this idolatry, and brooding in solitary vanity, generate other than false and distempered ideas concerning itself and the universe? From such radical disorder cannot be born healthy conceptions. But the individual who cultivates an objective development in which the first step is renunciation of self, and without which there can be no progression, necessarily acquires ideas quite opposed to these. The purport and definition of life acceptable to and believed in by the general mass of mind, which is either not capable of or not inclined to deep, sincere inquiry, and in which, from inheritance and education, the worship of self prevails, is not only something with

which he cannot be altogether satisfied, but is something with which he is greatly dissatisfied—is an erroneous conception, the belief of ignorance. To him there is a far closer affinity, a far more intimate fellowship, a deeper communion with his surroundings, than was ever conveyed in the lessons which the prophets of the popular intellectual faith teach. Increasing intelligence, based upon a right view of self, multiplies in man the avenues of sympathy with things external to him, and gradually removes the hostile mask from off the face of nature, to reveal her fulfilling, in the completeness of her excellency, the high behests of Providence; and in the fulfilment of that mission he consciously or unconsciously assists. Nature is no longer dreaded by him, whether she displays herself in storms, or tempests, or earthquakes. These, her grander necessities, exist, not for the mere purpose of limiting his individual existence, and certainly not in order to make his individual life timorous and superstitious. Nature is not always thinking of a man. There is a little space provided for him, and a little time allotted him in which to do his little work; and if he, in his self-formation, obeys her laws, it is well for him and for those that come after him; but if, in the pride of self, he try to thwart or, in his cunning, think to cheat nature, or, in his ignorance, despise her, there are avenging laws which, ceasing not day or night, will not fail to retaliate.

The higher the mental conceptions are raised above the level of the individual the less liable are they to be affected by the individual's fortunes; the less they are trammelled by the individual's feelings, the more universal and all-embracing they become. The more man comprehends of universal nature, the less significant does self become and all the things that pertain to it. And as the individual, rising out of blinding subjective mists, finds satisfaction in the clear, objective contemplation of his life as a part of nature, so is he less disturbed by the apparently contradicting and inconsistent character of the daily incidents of which that life is composed. And it is one of the results of complete self-culture and consciously directed development that, in addition to the serenity with which the individual can endure the petty evils of every-day life, yea, can even make these "little foxes that spoil the grapes," minister to his amusement, he becomes, by the evolution of his highest powers, a consciously harmonious part of nature, and is in the intelligent enjoyment of that happiness of which he had a foretaste in the mysterious melody of his unconscious child-communion with nature. For it hath been well said that "the higher powers in us are, for the present, muses, which refresh us on our toilsome course with sweet remembrances." [Novalis.] In which sentence he who can gather up the threads of his existence may find much truth.

The sensibility of his moral nature is also heightened. In the constant operation of laws he finds a certainty that eternity is stamped on every action of his life. Every exercise of his force acts upon the universe, and assists to form the future. His evil and good actions run their course, increasing or diminishing the evil or the good that is in the world. He does himself reap some; he never can reap all the consequences of his deeds. By the development of his moral nature his knowledge of evil embraces all its consequences even to their remotest ramifications, and although he should assuredly escape the full penalty of his evil deed, yet he knows that it will in time be exacted of humanity even to the last farthing. He transcends time and space; and that which is certain in the future becomes as it were actual in the present. Moral truth becomes his natural element.

And yet there can be no doubt that a development of this kind incapacitates an individual for much of the sensuous enjoyment of life, as it also exempts him from many of life's sorrows. To him who looks upon himself as an individualised portion of nature, having life in his turn, inheriting it, and leaving it for an inheritance, there appears no longer a bright mirage gleaming over life, but the leaden gloom which hangs over death is also removed. If hope no longer gilds the future, memory ceases to shudder over the past. Strong in the conscious recognition of natural law, in the operation of which he is but an event, borne up by the "everlasting arms," he possesses his soul in patience, and neither regrets a painful past nor anxiously anticipates an uncertain future.

Having experimental proof of his own development, he believes in the corresponding development of humanity. Generations pass away and races die out; still man progresses. Myriads of types are created, myriads of combinations of different qualities produced whereby man may be advanced one step onwards. He does not look for the immediate results of collective life in himself or in his day. He has sufficient knowledge to justify unbounded faith that the day will dawn, although "as yet, struggles the twelfth hour of the night," and in that faith he does with all his might his appointed task. The whole race is but as one man; all are members of one body. Each has a function to perform, a lifework to build up which has its due place in completing the growth of the whole. It is said to take three generations to make a gentleman, to refine and polish the coarseness and rudeness of uneducated mind; but it takes generation after generation to alter permanently the thought of a nation—ages to alter the thought of a world to a small extent. But although time is everything to the individual who has so much to do and then to disappear, ten thousand years are but as one day in the gradual development of nature from that first movement on the face of the waters to the vibration of nerve force through the

human brain. By how much an individual develops in harmony with law by so much does he raise the standard of thought of his own age, and by so much does he advance humanity. Life is then to every one a most serious matter: when the individual considers that he has a hand in moulding the destiny of humanity, that when he incurs bodily or mental weakness his degeneration is actual loss to the whole family of man, that he has bartered superior force for inferior force, and humanity has lost by the transaction, he is supplied with an exceedingly powerful motive for learning the laws of nature, and for unlearning all that he may know or may even love that is in opposition to them. And to do this in a greater or less degree is possible to every individual, no matter what little inner circle, mill-horse like, he daily treads to supply the wants of his physical nature.

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