

THE OBJECTIVITY OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE.

MANY are the systems of philosophy which have, within recent years, appealed to the thoughtful consideration of men. In every case the appeal has awakened a willing response; and the examination conducted by competent judges, with uniform courtesy and admirable forbearance, terminates with the verdict that they all contain a surprisingly small amount of truth, buried in a surprisingly large amount of error.

The source of all these errors is, no doubt, a profound ignorance of man's nature, the absence of a just appreciation of his capabilities and of his wants, which must necessarily eventuate in establishing gross materialism or inane idealism. Had half the energies employed in speculation been directed to a simple observation of realities, the increment to the general fund of knowledge would offer a better qualitative, if not quantitative, representation of the labor expended. Man being formed by a substantial union of soul and body, all the operations attributable to him as a member of the human species must bear the stamp of his nature. In common justice to the intelligence and wisdom of his Creator, who not only proposes to Himself an end in all that He does, but aptly disposes the means to a certain attainment of that end, he must recognize the inter-dependence of body and soul, the admirable correspondence between the sensations of the one and the affections of the other as an essential provision in the economy of the Divine plan. The body is the handmaid of the soul in supplying through sensation the materials upon which the intellect is to act; it is the medium which preserves intact our relations with the external world, and supplies the thousand and one truths which are categorized and verified by the understanding. If we isolate the soul in its operations, we elevate man to the order of pure intelligences and pronounce the body superfluous. On the first point, what is the testimony of conscience, and in the second case, how vindicate the wisdom of the Creator?

The subjectivism of Kant, which would make us the victims of appearances, is fundamentally a denial of the true nature of man; and here we have an *a priori* reason for rejecting the legitimacy of its conclusions, to which additional strength is added by the irresistible impulses of our nature. Indeed, philosophers may cavil as much as they please about the reality contained in our ideas; but when they return to practical life, their actions are at variance

with their theories, nature asserts her dominion once more, they become men instead of enthusiasts, and comport themselves as do their more humble brethren. After all, who would not rather be wrong with nature, if it must be so, than right with the philosophers?

Again, the same fundamental principle which, in the subjective order, underlies the criterion of consciousness and gives validity to its testimony, impels the intellect to advance still farther and to say that our ideas are not mere empty forms of the mind, pure phenomena succeeding one another without any thread of connection, launched like some mysterious craft upon the vast sea of thought, indicating neither whence they came, whither they tend, or why they are there. Were it so, then might we conclude with Carlyle: "Not our logical mesurative faculty, but our imaginative one, is king over us, I might say priest and prophet, to lead us heavenward, or magician and wizard to lead us hellward. The understanding is thy window—too clear thou canst not make it: but phantasy is thy eye, with its color-giving retina, healthy or diseased."

No; our ideas present themselves as symbols, symbolizing something, as well accredited messengers giving adequate expression to the truth which they contain.

It is a strange fact that skeptics, relying upon consciousness, recognize the force of the principle of contradiction in the subjective order, and still refuse to admit its validity in the objective order, although incited and eventually constrained thereto by the necessity of their nature. Facts require witnesses, not proofs. And if we find ourselves irresistibly forced to the admission that we really experience certain modifications in our soul, so, also, are we under the inevitable necessity of believing that what appears to us is really as it appears. If we cannot prove the former (and we cannot), neither can we prove the latter; in both cases there is equal necessity. Hence, to discriminate where discrimination is inadmissible is to manifest a pernicious predilection in favor of one's own conceits, an arbitrary exclusiveness which, seeking a reason for everything and giving none for anything, would undermine the foundations of science by rendering the operations of the mind impracticable, make man a mystery to himself, and sap the root of morality—for surely this is the philosophism which says: "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." (*Hamlet*, Act II. Sc. 2.)

We have thus far strongly insisted upon the invincible necessity of our nature to accept the light of objective evidence manifesting itself subjectively; but we do not intend to thrust this fact as a homeless and helpless charge upon your charitable consideration. At this particular point of philosophic inquiry, the resources of reason have expended themselves, for we are now dealing with primitive facts of our nature. Should reason attempt to

go further, it transports itself beyond its proper element, and only succeeds in showing its own imbecility. However, we do not ingloriously abandon the field to skeptics, but draw upon arguments which, though indirect, are not the less apposite or cogent.

Those who find such insurmountable difficulties in admitting the connection of the idea with its object, speak very securely of subjective certitude. "We are not sure," they say, "that our ideas are more than illusive phantoms relatively to the external world, because reason is unable to prove the existence of any necessary connection between the subjective and the objective orders; but as for internal phenomena, conscience will not allow us to doubt of their reality. We are sure that we think, that we feel, and that we are cognizant of what takes place within us. But, pray, upon what grounds? If you reject entirely the objective order, the principle of contradiction fails; and in that case you are not sure that you think, that you feel, since you can at the same time both experience and not experience the same subjective modifications. Either, then, you are sure that you feel and think, or you are not. If you are, then you assert the existence of something objective; if you are not, then universal skepticism has the day.

The inference which we naturally draw from this argument is, that the subjective supposes the objective order, and is so entirely dependent upon it that both must stand or fall together. It is impossible to advance one step towards the acquisition of truth without attaching an objective value to our ideas, without supposing an objective truth in some judgments. Or, in the words of St. Thomas: "There are some truths in which there can be no appearance of error—as in the case of the axioms; wherefore, our intellect must assent to them." (Lib. 2 Sent., dist. 25, q. 1., a. 2, c.)

But there are other still more important phases of the question to be considered. Subjective certitude supposes that we have the consciousness of our own identity at various times, as also that the mind enjoys the power of reflecting upon itself. But if our ideas be deprived of their objectiveness, then are we in doubt as to our individual personality.

Consciousness is of present acts. When, therefore, we affirm that we are the same persons now that we were yesterday, the truth of the judgment is manifestly dependent upon our knowledge that the relation existing between the idea of what we were yesterday and the reality is identical with that existing between the present idea and its reality. In other words, the state of our existence in the past is presented to us by the idea which enters into the present act of consciousness, between which idea and its object there is, therefore, a perfect correspondence.

If, then, this relation be denied, your identity dissolves before your very eyes; you know not at any one moment whether you

be the same person that you were the moment before ; you experience diverse acts taking place in your soul ; but for you they are meaningless, because disconnected and out of sympathy with the necessities of your being. In arriving at this conclusion, we have shown that the validity of our judgments is based upon the correspondence of the idea with its object. If this adequation be wanting by reason of the non-existence of the object, all judgments are impossible. Judgments enter into ratiocination in quality of essential constituents. Consequently, if judgments be impossible, reasoning is at an end. Moreover, the human mind, being the lowest in the order of intelligences, acquires its knowledge not by intuitive perception, but by many successive judgments and reasonings ; these being impracticable, thought itself must disappear from our midst. But not even the act of reflection, by which the mind makes itself the object of its own consideration, appears to be possible, for reflection is a second act which supposes a first or direct act bearing towards it the relation of object. Since, however, there is no such thing as objective truth, it follows that there can be no reflection. From what has been said, it is evident that in the event of such opinions obtaining general sway, the colossal edifice of science would find itself trembling to its very base ; for not only is the legitimacy of man's faculties as criterions of truth questioned thereby, but the object of all science, which is the *nature of things*, and not our ideas, is destroyed. These are some of the consequences which follow in the train of subjectivism, and which, independently of the dictates of our natural reason, would be sufficient to make us revolt against doctrines so absurd, not to say pernicious. To the abnormal desire of subjecting all truths, even the most evident, to the touchstone of reason and to the conviction that in such a capacity reason had failed, is traceable the frenzy which possessed Berkeley with the determination of doubting everything. The quintessence of the philosophy of pure reason is contained in the epigrammatic verse :

“ We are such stuff
As dreams are made of, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.”—(*Tempest*, Act IV. Sc. 1.)

But if we are appalled, and justly so, at the sight of the frightful destruction caused in the realm of intelligence by those who refuse to our ideas all objectiveness, what shall we say when we contemplate the results of their excursion into the sphere of morality, where the havoc is the more lamentable in that the interests involved are more important ? We have seen the sensible and intellectual orders fade before the withering sophistry which thrives in doubt, and now we are called upon to witness the dissolution of the moral world. There are two kinds of intellectual pronounce-

ments: the one speculative, the other practical; both are equally evident, universal and necessary. The former are the fundamental principles of all rational science, the latter of all action. The former express the synthesis of what is, the latter of what is to be done and come under the denomination of moral principles. If asked their nature, we answer that they are manifestations of the infinite wisdom of God, defining the essential, and therefore necessary relations of things among themselves, and indicating to us, through the feeble light of reason, the means which must, without fail, lead us to our appointed end. They are laws, then, instituted for our direction as moral beings, and emanating from God, the Creator of our souls. Here, again, as in the case of intellectual principles, our understanding spontaneously yields to the force of immediate evidence, and pronounces them objective and real, since they have their reason of existence in the Divine essence. But we are told that there is no such thing as the real order. Then, away with all laws and principles, since, at best, they are utterly useless. Why should we be obliged to sacrifice our liberty by subjecting our will to certain rules of conduct, when they express but a combination of meaningless ideas, which have no binding force in themselves and whose observance or violation is attended with neither advantage nor disadvantage? The law supposes the existence of good and evil, since it enjoins the one and prohibits the other—but for us, good and evil are mere figments. What though there exist laws which tell us when we do good or evil? what though the words good and evil find a place in the vocabulary of all nations, thus proving a universal belief in their real existence? what though conscience keeps constant watch over all our actions, approving or reproving us according as we fulfil or prove faithless to our obligations? For us, good and evil have only a phenomenal existence, and can, therefore, command no influence over our conduct. The law also supposes a legislator who has the authority to promulgate it. But, how are we to know that such a being exists? Whether we infer His existence from the idea of the infinite with Descartes, from the existence of the moral law with Kant, or from the idea of necessary and contingent beings, of mover and moved, of primary and secondary efficient causes, with the scholastics, we are never sure that our idea corresponds to the reality unless we concede to it an objective value.

But you may say, although the intellectual order be involved in uncertainty, it is far otherwise with the moral order. Speculative reason teaches us nothing objective, but practical reason imposes an obligation which is both real and objective. To proceed after this manner is to evade rather than to solve the difficulty. At all events, such admissions must be attributed to the secret impulses of nature triumphing over sophistry, and to the conviction on the

part of subjectivists that without the real order there can be nothing but inextricable confusion. However, the distinction made between speculative and practical reason is gratuitous, for it rests on no proof of reason or fact of experience. In any case, it serves no purpose but to show the dilemma in which its author has succeeded in placing himself; for, according to the system which he has constructed, all truths, whether they pertain to the speculative or practical order, are only forms of the mind, and hence destitute of corresponding objects in the real order. Having in the beginning absconded from facts of experience and taught that the operations of the mind are to be explained *a priori*, he can never bridge over the gulf separating the objective from the subjective order. This must be evident from the manner in which he attempts to explain the origin of morality. He makes the moral worth of an action depend upon its obligatory character. But what imposes the obligation? Practical reason. Therefore practical reason, which we have shown to be entirely subjective, is the efficient cause of morality, which must likewise be subjective; and if morality be objective, it represents nothing fixed or determinate, but is liable to constant mutation, and, varying with each individual, may prove self-contradictory. What must be the character of the thoughts, the aspirations, the sympathies and the affections of a human heart when such a lax code is proposed to man as an effective means of developing the total capacities of his moral nature? In the depths of his soul he experiences only chagrin and disappointment, for his yearnings are after a nobler ideal. But his reason offers him no other, because it is unable to measure the infinity which is bound up in a human spirit, causing it to expand until it has attained the fruition of its object.

We have now arrived at the end proposed to ourselves. In taking a survey of the ground traversed, we must be convinced that there is no fact of our nature more immediately evident or supported by stronger proofs than that of the objective character of human knowledge. We have seen that wherever nature commands superiority—as in the duties of practical life—we necessarily refer our ideas to the reality; and, moreover, that when a different course is pursued, we destroy all intellectual and moral principles, undermine the foundation of even the subjective order, involve everything in obscurity, and ensure the permanent triumph of doubt. If this picture be frightful to contemplate, it is that presented by subjective philosophy when exposed in its true light. Yet it serves a good purpose in showing how empty must be all the cavils of skepticism when confronted by nature, and discourages pride of intellect by teaching our reason that it, as all things else, has a limit beyond which it may not go.