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The Influence of Metaphysical Speculation.

The opinion prevails extensively that questions of abstract thought are so remote from the uses of our daily life that they may be safely dismissed from serious consideration, or handed over for investigation to men who have leisure for such trifles. Most of these questions, it is plausibly maintained, cannot be determined with certainty, and in the hurry and bustling excitements of practical affairs, it would be folly to give time and labor to the study of questions which yield such small results, and which after all cannot be satisfactorily settled.

It is also alleged, that such subjects have been violently controverted, have originated diverse schools of thought, have engendered animosities, and created sects ready to enforce their opinions by the poorest of all arguments, an appeal to force, the *ultima ratio regum*. Hence it is argued that all philosophizing on questions that cannot be determined experimentally should be discouraged, and men should betake themselves to studies and pursuits which have a practical and appreciable bearing on human progress and happiness.

It is our purpose to show by example chiefly, how some of the most abstract and recondite principles become both practical and efficient in moulding society; and that the investigation of them cannot be safely left to shallow sciolists, and superficial inquirers into the laws of matter or of mind.

It has been but a few years since all motion in our solar system has been referred to one genetic source, the sun, which operating in innumerable ways, becomes mediately or immediately the cause of all physical changes. So a single principle discovered in the realm of abstract thought often becomes the moving energy of intellectual and social changes, which entirely transfigure the face of human affairs.

Men decry and disparage these subtle, transforming influences, because they are unable to trace their effects, or to grasp them in their operation.

No temple, whether built on mount Zion, or in the enduring structures of human institutions, was ever framed aright which was not first devised in the ideal chambers of the brain. We are all castle builders, by a necessity of our being; and little will that system be worth whose unity, harmony, coherence and proportion have not been idealized by the creative energies of mind.

For our first illustration of the influence of metaphysical speculation, let us take the doctrine of the Origin of Ideas. To a superficial thinker it may seem of small consequence how we explain the origin of ideas, but when considered historically it will be found to be a vital question.

About two hundred years ago, John Locke attempted to prove that all our ideas have their origin in sensation and reflection. He thought by this inquiry

and argument to overthrow the prevailing notions respecting innate ideas. His work had a powerful effect on the English mind, and soon found its way to the Continent. Condillac in France accepted one half of Locke's theory, and sought to prove that ALL our ideas are derived from sensations. According to this philosophy, a man can know nothing except by impressions received from external nature. Memory, attention, conscience, and all the faculties were transformed sensations. The effect of this system, clear and comprehensible on account of its shallowness, was immense. Physical investigation, under its stimulus, was greatly promoted, and the morals and politics of France were revolutionized. This doctrine, apparently so harmless, was essentially a revolutionary one.

For if the senses are the only medium of ideas, then there is no knowledge possible except by contact with Nature around us, and from its interpretations by the senses. Hence material Nature is all that can be known to us, and it is irrational to look for anything beyond Nature. By such irresistible logic, all certitude was denied to every spiritual idea, or conception of the divine.

It is historically true that during this period, some of the most remarkable discoveries were made in the physical sciences. The extraordinary devotion of scientists to the interrogation of nature during the last half of the eighteenth century, gave an impulse to this class of discoveries, the effects of which are felt to the present time.

But in the realm of morals and of politics the influence of this philosophy was not equally beneficent. It became in fact a deadly Upas, blighting all within the reach of its pestiferous exhalations. It was during this period also that the great High Priests of immorality and irreligion appeared in France, and whose chief function seemed to be to guillotine their followers.

Adopting the philosophy of sensation, as it was called, they were led to test every idea of virtue and morality by its relation to the senses, and with them all morality consisted in the conformity of actions to the demands of sense; and to such a pitch did this philosophical extravagance rise, that one of the most eminent writers of this school ventured to assert, "that the passions are superior to the intellect, and one becomes stupid when he ceases to exercise them".

With respect to the influence of these principles, it is said by contemporary writers, that the book of Helvetius, who carried out this philosophy to its rigorous conclusion of atheism and revolution, was found on all tables, and that its success was not surprising, as it told the secret of every body. For fifty years or more this was the prevailing tone of philosophy in France, and as its natural progeny, irreligion, atheism and an utter disregard of life and human rights were born from it.

Nor was this philosophy less potent in

its relation to the politics of the eighteenth century. It is found in history that religions and moral changes, are connected by some necessary law of sequence with political revolutions. The same philosophizing that changed the ethical belief of France, and brought religion into contempt, dealt also a staggering blow at the political system of the country. If it be admitted that men are merely the creatures of sense, and are made what they are by the objects that surround them, and if they are not in as good a condition as they desire to be, then the remedy is found in changing the form of government. Upon just such reasoning as this, the ancient regime of France was overthrown, and the philosophy of sensation became not only the philosophy of immorality, but of revolution.

Other speculative principles, no less pernicious, were working in men's minds at this time, to the statement of which we may return at another time, and which contributed in their measure to effect the great social and political changes, that took place in France at this period,—the effects of which are felt to this day.

It is enough for the purpose we have in view to show *how*, and in what *degree* metaphysical speculation has worked in human society, and to claim for this apparently abstruse study that consideration and appreciation which it demands from those who wish to understand the events of history in their evolution and effects.

A. R. B.

Goethe's Wilhelm Meister.

The one book of the German philosopher that has created discordant opinions among men of culture and literary acumen. We take up a Review upon this work, and find it criticised most severely for sentimentality, and lack of cool-headed decision in the hero of the incidents. The first Book pictures to us nothing more than a love sick youth, whose sentimental convulsions of expression come to a reasoning reviewer as if it were the "dog returning to his vomit"—in being forced to read it. But we must except from this assertion the clean-carved manner the author had of dealing with the mentalities, if we may so express it, of the persons made known. Still, it is nothing more than every boy of little more than average ability has experienced. His love for Maria, his puppet-show excitements, and his dread of business life during these early days, are common experiences of imaginative minds. But we must, we confess, allow that the great German made the beginning for a more than ordinary intellect, when he laid the puppet scenes, and mental occupation of the poetical youth thereat. The ease with which Wilhelm committed volumes of verse, at an early age lifted him almost to the height in every good mind's experience, when ambition deems fortune a puppet, and boasts that fate rests with his own finger-ring; that our way is as we choose to hew. But he was quickly thrown back upon himself

by his frequent blunders. But he never committed the same blunder twice. And just as he is coming into manhood, we have a comparison of characters,—himself and his friend Werner, that must carry more than one mind back to college days; when the Fellows could plainly see in John, the future diplomatist; in Charles, the cool-headed financier, whose debits were never more than his credits; in another, the polished Chesterfield of some future Washington society. In Werner, we have the common man of upholstery culture; the man of trade and comfort. In Wilhelm, an enthusiast in ideas; the personal exposition of the idea that a superior thinker, a literary man, can not possibly be a good mechanic. There have been those in literary life, whom work alone seemed to have lifted there; but there was an undoubted motor to inspire the work. I remember in reading a criticism of Hazlitt upon a reviewer and thinker, of his day, to have been struck by the idea presented, that the author criticised was only mechanically a genius. At the same time, Mr. Hazlitt mentioned that the same gentleman spent one whole day ransacking a renowned author's prolific works, in order to ascertain the exact origin of a sentence quoted at a dinner-table. There is a genius that compels such labor. An ordinary mind could not fly so high as to be stirred by a simple sentence.

But even while under the pangs of a suspicious love, our hero finds conversation with Werner that leads us to think him not altogether woman-minded. We find him doing the inevitable work of a mind growing to maturity, retrospectively glancing at his beginnings, that he would sooner see in ghost-phantasies than in reality. And here he argues with Werner, in such a manner that one could think he were almost entering the portals of an exchange: "Because every man who is incompetent to produce the best, should wholly abstain from art, and carefully avoid all its temptations. There exists in every man a certain unaccountable desire to imitate the object which he sees, but this desire is far from proving that he possesses the capacity for succeeding in what he may undertake;" this is in justification of his burning all his manuscripts—poems, etc., which would leave many a youthful mind stranded on the barrenness of unexercised faculties, had not Werner sensibly objected that "there were many idle hours which could be thus profitably employed." Then follows an energetic argument by Wilhelm, maintaining, like every inexperienced mind, that catch-hours in business intervals are incompatible with poeey. Then we think we see a little of what is called "literary enthusiasm," or affectation of what is not felt, when Wilhelm, after a long burst of eloquence, confidently confesses that "these fantasies ever pursue me. * * * * Who could have foretold that the arms of my spirit with which I had hoped to seize something great, and perhaps grasp infinity, would so soon be shattered?" Here you imagine for a moment that you see a