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ON DISCUSSION

AS A MEANS OF ELICITING TRUTH.

A PAPER

READ BEFORE

THE LONDON DIALECTICAL SOCIETY,

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BY

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ON DISCUSSION AS A MEANS OF ELICITING TRUTH.



RATHER more than twenty years ago, as I was strolling down the chief street of St. Bees on a sultry Sunday afternoon, a cottage door stood open, and showed a decently-dressed man and his wife taking their Sunday's meal, and, in their way, discussing some apparently important matter at the same time as their food. Their voices were raised and their tones eager, and as I passed by I heard their argument, and being an outsider literally as well as metaphorically (for I had not the least idea what they were talking about), I had ample opportunity of seeing most of the game. And it was simply this: "Yes, you did!" "No, I didn't!" "Yes, you did!" "No, I didn't!" and so on, repeated at least half a dozen times as I passed by, in tones of unmistakeable obstinacy. Here was a case of typical dialectics,—I don't mean a specimen of argument by philosophical discussion, but a truly typical specimen of the usual argument by reiterated assertion.

Assertion without reason assigned, assertion from intuition, from feeling, from the vaguest and most in-

complete knowledge of a subject, is so sweet and easy, that we are all only too ready to fall into it ourselves. Positive assertions, indeed, generally relate to matters about which we are very ignorant. A physician told me the other day, that his sister had passed through an ambulance class, and now laid down the law on anatomy and physiology in a way which he, who had studied the subjects for twenty years, instead of six weeks, could not venture to imitate. Some assertors frequently venture on argument which, when analysed, amounts to saying : "It is so, because it is so, because I know it is so, because I feel it is so, because it can't be otherwise, because it stands to reason, because every schoolboy knows it, because I'm certain I've seen it scores of times, (at least I know I did once,) and besides every fool knows it must be so, and that's enough." Certainly, quite enough. Every wise man, of course, endorses what every fool knows.

But there's another side to the question, which I will also illustrate by a perfectly authentic anecdote. A carpenter in a village at the North of Yorkshire, when my late brother-in-law proposed that he should undertake some job, would say : "You'll excuse *me*, sir," with a deferential touching of his cap, coupled with an unmistakeable emphasis on the personal pronoun, "You'll excuse *me*, sir, but there's a deal of things as goes to everything. You'll excuse *me*, sir." Now this pithy remark sums up nearly every point which has to be borne in mind in making assertions, and which gives value to discussion. There is indeed "a deal,"

an inconceivable quantity of circumstances and considerations, which "goes to everything" on which we have to make an assertion, and we cannot by possibility be acquainted with more than a very minute fraction of them, unless we have the brain capacity of the rustic that learned all about the steam-engine in five minutes, and never forgot what he heard, though his instructor would perhaps hardly recognise the lesson in the abridged report. The very fact, however, that most people have not thought of circumstances which may prove of the utmost importance in forming a judgment, but which spontaneously occur to others, shows the great value of discussion, in which these circumstances, or at least many of them, are immediately adduced. We have thus a greater chance of arriving at a correct notion of what is really the case,—the truth as it is commonly called,—supposing that, and not the upholding of our own assertions, to be our real purpose. Now, the Dialectical Society aims at arriving at the truth by means of discussion, and as I was asked to open the present session by a paper, it occurred to me that there was no subject more important for the Society to consider than that which they look upon as the very charter of their existence.

When a person reads a paper on which a discussion has to be raised, it is to be presumed that he has thought it well over, that the statements he makes are the result of study, examination, or experiment, but that he acknowledges that of "the deal of things that goes to everything" many may have escaped him, which,

when presented, may induce him to modify his statements partially or wholly. In fact, it is a condition that whoever presents his judgments for criticism, admits that they may be criticised. We recollect the barrister turned parson in Theodore Hook's novel, who found it so comfortable when he got into his pulpit, that there was no one to rise on the other side. But a more sober judgment would be, that that is the most unfortunate position for men to occupy, and the acts of the uncontradictable bear out this view. But as to eliciting truth by discussion—well, I should have to pause a little before I saw my way to giving an opinion on the subject. Let me explain some of my difficulties.

We all know Pilate's petulant remark, "What *is* —TRUTH?" and really, when we hear so much called "the truth" in one generation which will be looked upon as dreams, or worse, in the next, we begin to appreciate the mind-weariness of a Roman who knew philosophy, and was bothered by a Jew's telling him that he had come into the world to bear witness unto "the truth," and that everyone that was of "the truth" heard his voice (John xviii. 37); and we can readily understand his finding no fault in the dreamer. At any rate, even if the scene be, as it may be, a mere dramatic invention, it is well conceived and conformable to nature as we know it now. *The truth!* what is it? What can we mean by it? How is it that for thousands of years the business of every philosopher has been to show that his predecessor had not found it out? Let me take a matter as far removed from the heats of

political and religious discussion as possible, and ask, are mathematics sublimated physics or intuitions? are they founded upon recollected and combined experiences, or axiomatic assertions, whose proof is in themselves? Now here's a subject, the very simplest in existence, appealing, one would think, to no one human passion, on which all the world acknowledges that exact notions are to be found if anywhere, and yet what is the truth already elicited by discussion? And you will perceive that I do not confine myself to extempore discussion by word of mouth, such as goes on in this room, which can at the very most be considered as preliminary, as suggestive, as giving ground for reflection. On the point I have raised the profoundest thinkers have laboured for years. They have read and re-read the discussions, they have proved the forensic weapons and armour at every conceivable point, and the result is, there are still two parties, the physicists and the intuitionists, and they are likely to remain, so far as I can see, for the difference is the fundamental one between those who found knowledge on experience, and those who spin it as a cobweb from their own brains.

But the world says, what does it matter? We know what a straight line is, and what an angle is, and whether we know it by experience or by intuition, what does that concern the business of life? Well, at any rate, the Association for the Improvement of Geometrical Teaching, in their syllabus, lately published, do not attempt to define a straight line or an angle,

and the late Prof. De Morgan said the best definitions were "a straight line's a straight line, and an angle's an angle." So people would seem to be independent of the controversy. But what becomes of truth? And may we not apply the same process to other matters, cease to inquire into origins or reasons, and take results with nothing to check them, just as a well-known musician said lately that music was better without acoustics? But in this case, again, what becomes of truth? and how is it to be elicited by discussion?

Such subjects as I have mentioned are, however, usually left to adepts. Geometrical conceptions and arguments are about the simplest in the world, but just for that reason, may be, the general public takes slight interest in them, and they are so little a matter of common experience that those who know nothing of them, really know that they are ignorant, though a few will persist in squaring the circle. If pressed they may say, "Oh! the truth's long been known about such things" (I'm afraid they would really say, "those sort of things,") "and they are of little use in practical life; we want to find the truth on matters of high import." And then, leaving the simplest, they jump at the most complicated. They will open up questions of right and wrong, society, government, religion, deity, atheism, eternal life, the soul, spirits, angels, devils, responsibility here and hereafter, inspiration, phenomena and noumena, metaphysics of all kinds, in short the vague, the difficult, the intangible, the inaccessible, the unintelligible, or at least the unknown.

These are what charm the general mind. To prove that God exists, to prove that there's no proof that God exists—some even try to prove that God does not exist, the admitted impossibility of proving a negative adding to the zest of the argument—to alter the whole system of government, to invent governments for people that they know nothing of, to recast legislation, to alter property relations, to reform everything; these are the questions about which discussion waxes interesting and eager, where no one can know much, and most know nothing, and truth remains quiet at the bottom of her well.

You will think that I am in the reversed case of Balaam, and being asked to bless have remained to curse. But that would be a mistake. Such subjects as I have named may even be discussed with advantage, if the discussion only succeeds in showing us how much more need we have of further thought, further inquiry, further knowledge, before we can reach a result. But it must not be expected that in the excitement of speaking at the moment, after merely hearing a paper, and with necessarily an imperfect recollection of its contents, any great advance can be made towards the settlement of a difficult question. This fact has been duly recognised in this Society by the rule (xv.) that no vote be taken with reference to the subject of the paper read, or discussion which may have taken place. Yet we can do much which is valuable. We can, by a small sample, gauge current opinion upon the subjects mooted. That will often

give us much to think over, especially in endeavouring to account for this current opinion, and in estimating what amount of knowledge it represents, and hence what amount of permanence it is likely to possess. It is especially valuable to those whose judgments run counter to general opinion, because it may lead them to consider matters and arguments which have entirely slipped their attention, and must be satisfactorily disposed of, before they can feel any certainty. But as for truth—!

But if truth cannot be discovered by discussion, how can it be attained? I do not know that it can ever be attained. I do not know that we have any test by which we could know that it had been attained. The test that we cannot conceive the contrary is individual, varying from man to man, and in the same man from one state of knowledge to another, and has entirely different meanings in different mouths. Yet at present it is held to be the best test by at least one of our best thinkers. Take an example from the axioms of Euclid, which are generally supposed to satisfy this test completely. "If equals be added to equals the sums are equal." Does not your assent to that depend upon your conception of the words "equal, add, and sum"? Giving them the only meanings most of you probably know, the only meanings known to Euclid—even to him each word had several meanings—you might accept the dictum, but even then you must qualify it and verify it for each particular case, as straight lines, angles, areas, circles, curved lines. But there are

such things as "directed lines." Does it apply to them? How can those who know nothing of the properties of directed lines and the nature of their addition, deny or accept the axiom? For directed straight lines on a plane it holds, for directed arcs of great circles on a sphere it does not hold, unless it is qualified with the words "in the same order," and those words need farther explanation. I am not going to demonstrate the fact, which is one of the fundamental propositions of Sir W. Rowan Hamilton's *Quaternions*. It is quite enough to state it, in order to show how inconceivability is as a test limited by our knowledge of the factors of thought.

My own practical test of a theory enunciated as true, that is of a truth in common parlance, rests not on inconceivability but on conceivability, thus: Conceive, or if possible, try experimentally, the effect of the joint action of this theory with others regarded as established, and see whether the result agrees with experience. This is mererly a *test*, not a proof. For example, the undulatory theory of light bears this test very well. Yet, I can by no means regard it as established. Such theories are merely as good as true within certain limits. And none of our theories seem to be established beyond those limits; scarcely any even can be fully established within those limits. It is frequently not even possible to experiment. A medicine cures a patient, we think. But we cannot restore him to his condition before taking the medicine, and see what would have happened had he not taken it, or had he

taken some other. We are driven to the very loose analogies of patients in what may appear similar cases, but are different in many secondary peculiarities, and the truth is very doubtfully elicited. Hence the great faith of people in doctors and nostrums,—in barbarous language, medicine-men and fetishes,—of whose real knowledge and action they are most profoundly ignorant.

Now in all such matters discussion is of great importance, because it supplies omissions, and causes consequences and connections to be viewed with different lights. Whenever we make subjective experiments we are apt to be blinded to exceptions, and see only what we wish to see. One who takes up the subject afresh, and views it from the side of his own environment, and the training of years that this has given him, which will almost invariably have been very different from those of the first propounder of the theory,—will be sure to find out the weak points and make the apparently substantial edifice totter to its base. But will he assist in erecting a firm edifice in its place? Will he have built a palace of truth? The most he usually does, at any rate, is to destroy an enchanted castle of error.

And this to my mind is the greatest use of discussion. It is negative not positive, destructive not constructive. It shows points of weakness, it does not build points of strength. It pulls to pieces, it does not re-create. Perhaps after any verbal discussion no one goes home convinced who has previously thought on the subject, least of all the propounder and his chief

opponent. The utmost gain of either is generally less security in his own opinion. Those who are convinced straight off are seldom worth convincing at all. How many votes in Parliament—our great dialectical society—are obtained through the speeches heard? Many persons may be shaken in their opinions, but there is generally a strong motive in the background, the support of party, which carries the day. In the smaller society here present—the great merit of which is that it is able to discuss subjects of all kinds with calmness and propriety, that it does not find it necessary to exclude those explosive subjects of religion, politics, and sex, which are generally tabooed—there is fortunately no party to support, there is a unanimous desire to find out what the reader of a paper means, by help of a rattling fire of questions, which are sometimes pretty difficult to answer, and then to state opinions from individual thought and knowledge for and against, to which the reader briefly replies. Now, there is no doubt in my own mind, that all this is admirable exercise for the discussers, that it greatly opens their eyes, clears their understanding, and makes them more fit to think. But that it after all elicits truth, at least directly, I must beg leave to doubt. Indirectly, no doubt, it does much towards helping a thinker forwards; directly, it does very little. There is necessarily no co-operation, no taking of a great subject to pieces, and working at the details separately, so as ultimately to form a perfect whole, like the large woodcuts of our periodicals, engraved by different hands on small

blocks of wood ultimately screwed together. Even the papers which are read are not parts of some great whole, but rather unconnected screeds of private thought on the most diverse subjects.

Thus in looking over the subjects of papers which have here been read and discussed during the last two years, I find them so unconnected that they can scarcely be classed. Religion occupied six papers, from Mr. Bradlaugh, Dr. Brydges, Mr. Picton, Mr. Foote, Mr. Parris, and myself, very far from beginners on the subject certainly, but as certainly unconnected by any common train of thought. Social arrangements—I can hardly say sociology—occupied as many evenings; two led by Mr. Coupland, and others by Mr. Rigby Smith, Mr. Fisher, Mr. Parris, and Mr. Montefiore. Mr. Conway gave two papers dealing with the Woman Question in different aspects. Three papers dealt with politics, under the leadership of Mr. Biggar, M.P., Mr. Probyn, and Dr. Drysdale. Four papers were devoted to matters of legal enactment, introduced by Mr. Tallack, Mrs. Lowe, Rev. Dawson Burns, and Professor Hunter, the last of which gave rise to a special committee. The other papers cannot easily be classed, but Mr. Levy spoke of his "Utopia," Mrs. Hoggan, M.D., on how to meet chronic illness, Rev. H. N. Oxenham on vivisection, and probably other subjects were also started, but this is enough to show the great variety and complexity of the matters brought before the Society to discuss. It is evident that unprepared discussions upon such

subjects could not lead to any elicitation of truth; they could at most be gymnastics of thought, excellent preparation, but necessarily unfinished work.

Might I suggest, by way of an experiment, your taking of a leaf out of the book of the Education Society? A variety of individual papers on unconnected branches of education, followed by discussions, used to take place before this Society, which has this year carried out a connected series of discussions upon one book, written by its president, Professor Bain, on "Education as a Science." Might not the Dialectical Society with advantage set apart, say one evening in each month, for connected discussions upon some such work as Spencer's "Data of Ethics"? Each chapter or section might be made the subject of a paper and discussion. Such a book is full of matter for discussion, and the discussers would have had the advantage of seeing the whole argument of the original writer collectively, before beginning to argue, together with the peculiar views of the opener. I throw this out merely as a suggestion for co-operative thinking and directed discussion. But to my mind such discussions would after all be only admirable exercises. They would not produce philosophic results, they would only enable those who take part in them more fully to appreciate the real work of philosophers, and hereafter, may be, really to play their part in advancing the thoughts of mankind.

The only discussion which in any way elicits an approximation to truth, that is, which gradually brings

men's thoughts into a juster conception of the objects of thought and their mutual relations, as evinced by greater security of prediction, is not the verbal discussion of an hour or the paper discussion of a lifetime. It is the discussion of one life's thought on another's, and lasts for ages, leaving its impress on the race, not the individual. It is at first sight surprising how much thought, carefully written out and even printed, never finds an echo in another century, when the individuals are gone, and other knowledge has grown up in the race. Even the raw form of that knowledge has only an antiquarian interest. The knowledge itself has become part of the race, and we forget the discussion which often cannot be unravelled without great difficulty. What man now cares to read of perpetual motion and the philosopher's stone? Who cares for judicial astrology? Who, beyond priests, care for patristic theology? The questions which fired thousands as to the books of Moses and Joshua, when the first volume of Colenso appeared, were scarcely heard when the seventh volume came out, though the man is happily still alive to do good. Why this fire and this apathy? An established Church was concerned in discussing away the first, which appealed to popular knowledge of the English Bible, and threatened to shake the edifice to its base by rending the rock on which it stood. The last volumes were learned discussions, into which no one cared to enter, for everyone was already convinced. No one now considers the books of Moses and Joshua to be verbally inspired—even the Establish-

ment has given them up, and although some of the ministers of other sects may yet feel sure that they are, such a fact only shows how little suited the teachers are to teach. This result, of course, has not come from one man, although I have referred to one man alone as a modern typical illustration. It has resulted from a discussion of four centuries, begun by men like Wycliffe and Luther, who thought they were merely dispersing the clouds of papacy, but who were establishing those negative principles, which have done much other work, and have still much work before them. But these men taught us nothing of what they purposed. They merely rubbed out ; they did not draw in. Their work was like those who remove the accumulated whitewash of centuries on the walls of a church to show the old fresco below. But they believed in the old fresco, and were themselves as intolerant as their predecessors of any suggestion that it was out of drawing, out of taste, or false in conception.

The history of religion in Europe and on the shores of the Mediterranean has been a succession of negatives. When and how the positive form of Egyptian worship came in, or the rude worship of the North of Europe, we know not. Even the Greek and Roman gods, although so far from primitive, are but indistinctly traceable. But Judaism was a negative form of polytheism. It made no new god, but it wiped off many. And round its one God grew a poetic literature due to great men and great thinkers, which was distinctly positive in character. But these men, and more

especially their interpreters, were intolerant of criticism. It came, many times in vain, at last in the form of Jesus, who merely scraped off the whitewash and endeavoured to exhibit the old conception of the one Judaic God (Matthew v. 17-20). Round this work, especially through the action of Paul of Tarsus, grew a new and very remarkable, I might almost say very strange, roll of doctrine, and finally to the old Judaic book was added the new Christian book. But so little did this form of Christianity revolutionise Judaism, that it absolutely incorporated it, and made the Jewish book the corner-stone of the Christian edifice to such an extent, that theoretical Christianity crumbles to dust when the legendary character of the two principal Mosaic histories of creation has been established.

Then round this pair of books grew a new literature, offering much that was positive, a priesthood, an interpretation of tradition, oftentimes irreconcilable with the books, but none the worse for that, and an intolerance of criticism to the extent of burning the critic. Then came another negative revulsion, another scraping off of the new accumulation of whitewash, and Protestantism bore aloft the old old fresco, much the worse for its continual overplastering, but still unaltered. "The books, the whole books, and nothing but the books!" was its motto. But that meant, the right of everyone to read the books,—granted,—and to criticise them,—oh, dear, no! It was only the new teachers who could interpret; what business had Tom, Dick, and Harry, who knew nothing of the matter, to put in a

word? or what business had a pale scholar, who had thought over the subject, who had investigated every trace and weighed every argument, to controvert the opinions for which the scrapers had given their life's blood? If he were a laic, it was impertinence; if he were an ecclesiastic, it was heresy. And heresy had its limits. Paul might "confess that after the way which they called heresy so worshipped he the God of his fathers, believing all things which were written in the law and the prophets." (Acts xxiv. 14), that is, believing in the fresco, but not the whitewash. But when it came to criticising the fresco itself, Paul thought very differently. "These things teach and exhort," says he; "if any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness, he is proud" (or a fool, says the marginal reading of the authorised version, the original word means 'smoked,' as in 'smoking flax shall he not quench' (Matt. xii. 20), a sufficiently expressive term of abuse; but it is only the first of a long series, for Paul proceeds), "knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth" (poor truth!) "supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself." (Tim. vi. 3-5.) It is clear that Paul would not have tolerated a Dialectical Society, with its "perverse disputings of men of (as a matter of course) corrupt minds."

It is evident, then, that Paul and Luther, the two typical reformers, did not seek to teach anything new, but merely to restore the old, and the work they did was exactly opposite to what they proposed : it was nothing less than to establish the right of discussion, the right of criticism, the right of everyone, learned or unlearned, to say his say. It is of the utmost importance that we should not limit criticism to those who have the requisite knowledge. (Our reviews, by the by, would be sadly blank if that were the case.) We have quite a right to turn a deaf ear to the words of a man who clearly knows nothing about the matter he is speaking about. But if we once attempt to prejudice his knowledge and keep him silent, we jeopardise the whole right of free discussion, and although free discussion will not elicit truth, there is no other means for eliminating error.

And these words contain the very pith of the observations which I have to make to you this evening. Discussion never has elicited truth, and there does not seem to be the slightest probability of its ever doing so. Approximations to truth arise from painfully evolved hypotheses of thinkers, who endeavour to form the simplest possible representations of all the facts they can manage to collect. But these collections are generally deficient, these representations frequently—but of course in typical cases always involuntarily—leave out of consideration important factors, or distribute the weight of facts injudiciously. Here steps in discussion and criticism, and puts its finger on the

blot. Even the veriest ninny who knows nothing about the matter may blurt out some fact which has escaped the philosopher's notice, although he may not have the least conception of what he is really saying. But everyone must have a right to speak, and we must leave it to their own good sense or modesty, based on consciousness of ignorance, not to speak unless they feel that they have something to say which has a bearing on the question. The function then of discussion, that is, of criticism, is the elimination of error, an extremely different thing from the elicitation of truth, but an essential part of the process. Without discussion, error is inevitable ; with discussion, truth is by no means certain, but it is rendered possible.

There is, however, another kind of discussion, which is meant to take place, for example, on a great scale in Parliament, and is daily taking place in small committees appointed to deliberate and advise on a course of action. Here each member is selected generally, or theoretically, with a view to his knowledge of the matter in hand, and although such bodies usually appoint one of their number, whom they are supposed to consider best qualified for the purpose, to draw up a scheme, the others in reviewing it are supposed not merely to criticise, but to amend, to make suggestions, to do positive as well as negative work, and, if they cannot agree, to draw up alternative schemes. A remarkable instance of this kind of discussion came under my notice a few years ago. The Association for The Improvement of Geometrical

Teaching, to which I have already had occasion to allude, appointed a committee (of which I may as well state I was not a member) to draw up a scheme for teaching Proportion, notoriously the most difficult subject in elementary mathematics. The committee, consisting of five excellent mathematicians, met, talked, and appointed one of their number to draw up a scheme to submit to them at their next meeting. The day came, the scheme was read, talked over, and put to the vote, when four voted against it, and one, the scheme-drawer himself, for it. That would never do. So another reporter was appointed to draw up another scheme, which was submitted to the next meeting, and with the same result, four against and one for, only the distribution of the voters was different. It was clear that no one scheme could come from these five competent men. So they agreed that each one should present his own report, and the Association had absolutely to select from among five different schemes, and they actually did select one and a-half, the meaning of which I could not make clear to you without entering into a mass of details quite unsuitable to a general audience. But the fact, of which I am personally cognisant, serves to exemplify, what will probably be within the experience of all, that even deliberative discussion does not generally lead to universally acceptable proposals, but usually ends in compromise, or, to put it in other words, does not really lead to positive truth, but at most to less error.

In such a society as the present, no one of course suspects that the discussions raised will have any immediate or wide influence on public opinion. The very fact that public opinion is very intolerant, and thinks that many subjects should never be discussed, which this society does not shrink from discussing, is enough to discredit its work in the eye of "the world." But, nevertheless, the members of this Society are also members of the great body social, and will form efficient units of that body in any deliberative act, while the training which they receive from frequent and animated discussion of topics which have the most important bearing upon acts of the community, cannot fail to enable them to sustain their part in a way which is not only creditable to themselves, but advantageous to the public. Especially would I reckon among the great advantages of such discussions as here arise, the opportunity which each member has of measuring his own strength. This may be very different on different subjects, and the result may be, I hope is, to lead them to increase their strength upon those matters where they are strongest, and to repair their weakness in others.

There are several pitfalls in discussion societies which have to be avoided. There is a great danger in mistaking readiness for depth, fluency for argument, and self-sufficiency for power. But the greatest danger of all is arguing for the sake of victory, of taking part for or against any opinion, no matter what, because there is somebody to oppose, not because the

speaker's own deliberations have led him to the expression of opinion. Still, with all such drawbacks, a well-conducted discussion society is an excellent school, by which a man may be led to the great work of life, the advancement of the race, physically, intellectually, and socially, not merely eliminating error, but eliciting truth.

NOTES.

As the Council of the Dialectical Society have resolved to print the preceding paper, which I felt at the time, and still feel, had not been sufficiently considered to deserve preservation in such a form, I take the opportunity of saying a few words on points which were raised on the discussion that followed.

The difficulty of following a written paper when read out, sufficiently well for discussing its principles, was well exemplified by one speaker, who appeared to suppose that I deprecated discussion, and considered it useless. Those who have read the paper will see how far from correct was any such conception.

Another speaker stated that discussion on paper was much inferior to discussion *vivâ voce*. For many purposes oral discussion is most important, especially as a preliminary, and discussion on paper is very tedious. But when we wish to arrive at precise notions, and not to omit arguments of importance, or to overlook what has been advanced through a lapse of memory, oral discussion necessarily fails. Again, oral discussions live in memory alone, unless reported verbatim, and are consequently rapidly forgotten, leaving only an impression, and often an incorrect impression, of what was said, entirely insufficient for anything approaching to the elicitation of truth.

Another speaker thought that I was wrong in deprecating speaking for the sake of speaking, or defending an opinion which the speaker did not entertain. He thought that both gave readiness and facility of language, and at the same time

an aptitude for considering objections. This may be fully granted, and in mere discussion *classes*, such speaking has its value. Especially it is useful to be able to call to mind all the objections which may be raised to an argument in which the speaker himself believes. But speaking without knowledge, without examination, without any further desire than to speak, and to raise arguments in which the speaker has himself no faith, is certainly not a way of eliciting truth.

The same speaker found that my anecdote respecting the committee on Proportion did not apply, because he supposed that there was a mere disagreement as to method and none in principle on such a subject. There happened to be widely diverse views on principle, and comparatively little difference on method. But the point of my anecdote was that a deliberative discussion of adepts will frequently end in compromise, and not in the ascertainment of "truth." The same speaker, however, touched upon the question of what is "true," and said that a distinction must be drawn between noumenal and phenomenal truth, that we must be satisfied with what is true "for general purposes," and not strive after the absolute. "Noumenal truth" did not form part of my argument. It is very difficult to conceive what is meant by it, and I did not intend to express myself in such a way as to lead to any supposition that I referred to noumenal truth at all. The expression "true for general purposes," used by the speaker, implied a distinct "compromise." And in all physical investigations, which are purely phenomenal, we are obliged to take "means" or "averages," which are all "compromises" in fact. The whole of science is based upon such "means," and no one dreams of being able to reach absolute exactness. But there are numerous inquiries—by far the most numerous and the most desired as subjects of discussion—which have not reached a scientific stage proper, so as to be reducible even approximatively, to arithmetic, and in these we must be

satisfied with very rough compromises indeed, although it is just in these that speakers are apt to assume the absolute correctness of their own views.

To another speaker it seemed that I had much underrated the power of discussion in eliciting truth, and he considered that there was a distinctly positive side to discussion. My paper certainly did not assert the contrary, for I gave due place to the positive suggestions which might be made, and often are made. But such suggestions are rather points of departure than anything else, and their immediate action is generally to divert the stream of another person's thoughts, and hence to eliminate error. If they really help to elicit truth, it is possibly always by giving a speaker matter to think over.

My suggestion for devoting one evening in a month to a systematic discussion of one book, did not meet with much favour. All that spoke on it, spoke against it. There seem to be practical objections arising from the working of the Society, from a desire for novelty, and from the impossibility of regular attendance. But by saying one evening a month, I intended to leave the other evening disposable for these discursive subjects, and by proposing that each part should be introduced by a paper, I intended to give each evening thus devoted an individual character, and not to partake of the nature of a six nights' unreported debate, where absence on two or three nights would prevent proper understanding of the arguments advanced when the intending debater was at last present. Also I hoped that each person who came would have had time to look over the whole of the book bearing upon the particular part to be there discussed, which would in some respect stand in place of reports of previous debates. Nor was it my intention that the series of debates should run over half of a whole session. It might be quite enough at first to set apart three or four monthly meetings for such a purpose. But the idea pre-supposed

that the Society was really desirous of eliminating as much error and eliciting as much truth as was possible upon certain subjects, or at any rate of discussing fully important theories and arguments which had been raised by profound thinkers. This supposes a very advanced stage for any society, and probably it is only adapted for a smaller body of very earnest thinkers. I think I remember how much good resulted from adopting a similar plan, to the members of a small debating society of which John Stuart Mill, George Grote, and others belonged when young men. There is a good deal about it in Mill's autobiography.

To show how oral discussion is apt to swerve from the point, it may be noted that on one speaker referring to Auguste Comte's hierarchy of the sciences, another instantly asked what single "truth" Comte had ever discovered, and the discussion threatened to become one on Comte's Philosophy and Polity, which, even if the speakers had thoroughly studied them, could not have been discussed in one evening, and had no connection however slight with the subject of my paper. But I may mention incidentally that Comte considered that the great merit of his religion over that of all others was that it was always discussible, although perhaps no person was ever more impatient of having his opinions called in question by a disciple, or formed an ecclesiastical system which would have more completely excluded discussion.

This tendency in a discussion to fly off to some other subject is very strong. In my former paper, the speakers constantly referred to religion as it should be, instead of the connotation of the English word religion, and supposed that I desired to lay down a definition of religion, instead of endeavouring to ascertain the common area of the numerous areas of thought it actually expresses. In a discussion I had lately to conduct concerning the especial use of classical over other languages as an instrument of education, the speakers continually complained that I checked them when speaking

of the general use of language as an instrument of education, which being admitted by the opener, had nothing whatever to do with the matter on which a discussion was sought to be raised. This is one of the great difficulties of oral discussion. A speaker is struck by a sudden thought in the course of speaking and follows it out, quite unaware that he is wasting valuable time set apart for one particular object, in dealing with another. One way which this acts is to induce a speaker to introduce his own pet theory on every occasion, as one of the speakers on my paper pointed out, reminding one of the way in which advertisements begin by talking of the Afghan or Zulu Wars in large letters, and glide off ingeniously to a recommendation of Eno's Fruit Salt or Moses's Boys' Suits. If this tendency is not at once checked by the chairman the discussion becomes abortive.

My chairman spoke especially upon the value of the negative character of discussion. It was Comte's opinion that no theory is really snuffed out unless it has been replaced by another, and hence he fulminated against the Reformation, and denied Luther a place in his calendar, although he admitted Paul. Mere negation, nothing but nihilism, is of course self-destructive, ending in a by no means desirable nirvâna. But the air is full of theories which cry out for annihilation, and the people who hold them are generally quite unreachable by other theories, at least until the first have been strangled by appeals to the most every-day knowledge. When these unfortunate theories have the further misfortune of subserving the material interests of large bodies of men, as the scribes and pharisees of pre-Christian Judaism, then they are far more difficult and far more necessary to be exterminated. These are the points of course to which the chairman's laudations of negation were directed, and some of them were alluded to in the paper. But the principle of discussion is mainly negative. As these Notes will show, the speakers generally take exception to

some views enunciated, and seldom if ever advance independent theories, unless they dart off to something irrelevant. Hence discussion is mainly critical, not co-operative. It might surely become more co-operative, but perhaps that is not to be expected in a Society so large and so constituted as the Dialectical.

These remarks touch upon nearly every point raised, and will I hope tend to render the paper more complete, although it remains in a far more imperfect state than I could have wished.

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