

Frances Wright's "On The Nature of Knowledge" - How Epicurean Is It?

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This article contains some very good material so I am pasting it in full so it is easier to read on a mobile phone and other formats. I hope I have eliminated most typos, but no doubt some remain:

ON THE NATURE OF KNOWLEDGE.

Who among us, that hath cast even an occasional and slightly observant glance on the face of society, but must have remarked the differing opinions, which distract the human mind; the opposing creeds and systems, each asserting its claim to infallibility, and rallying around its standard pertinacious disciples, enthusiastic proselytes, ardent apologists, fiery combatants, obsequious worshipers, conscientious followers, and devoted martyrs? If we extend our observation over the surface of our globe, and consider its diversified population, however varied in hue and feature, we find it yet more varied in opinions, in one opinion only invariably agreed, viz. that of its infallibility.

The worshiper of sculptured idols bows before the image of his hand, and shrinks with unfeigned terror, if a sacrilegious intruder profane the sanctuary of his superstition. The adorer of the bright luminary which marks our days and seasons, sees in the resplendent orb, not a link in the vast chain of material existence, but the source of all existence; and so from the most unpretending savage, to the most lettered nation of a lettered age, we find all shaping their superstitions, according to the measure of their ignorance or their knowledge, and each devoutly believing his faith and practice to be the true and the just. Or let us confine our observation within the limits of the country we inhabit—how varying the creeds arising out of one system of faith! How contradictory the assertions and expectations of sects, all equally positive and equally, we may presume, conscientious! How conflicting the opinions and feelings of men upon all subjects, trivial or important! until we are tempted to exclaim, "Where, then, is right or wrong but in human imagination, and what is truth more than blind opinion! Few of us prone to study or observation, yet educated after existing methods, but must have asked these questions, and halted for a reply.

Should the problem here started be, I say not impossible, but even difficult of solution, lamentable must be the human condition to the end of time! Had truth no test—no standard—no positive, no tangible existence, behold us, then, sold to error, and, while to error, to misery, through all the generations of our race! But, fortunately, the answer is simple; only too simple, it would appear, for mystery loving, mystery seeking man, to perceive and acknowledge.

Let not the present audience imagine, that I am about to add one more to the already uncountable, unnameable systems, which distract the understandings of men, or to draw yet new doctrines and precepts from the fertile alembic of the human brain. I request you to behold in me an enquirer, not a teacher; one who conceives of truth as a jewel to be found, not to be coined; a treasure to be discovered by observation, and accumulated by careful, persevering industry, not invented and manufactured by learned art or aspiring quackery, like the once fashionable elixir of immortality and philosopher's stone. My object will be simply to take with you a survey of the field of human enquiry; to ascertain its nature, its extent, its boundaries, its limits; to discover, in the first place, what there is for us to know; secondly, the means we possess for acquiring such knowledge as is of possible attainment, and, thirdly, having satisfied ourselves as to what can be known, and as to what we know, to seek in our knowledge the test of our opinions.

It must be admitted, that, as all our opinions must rest upon some evidence, real or imagined, so upon the truth or falsehood of the evidence admitted, must rest the truth or falsehood of the opinions based thereupon. It is evident, therefore, that before we can apply any safe or certain test to our opinions, we must well understand the nature of true evidence; before we can reflect, we must have something to reflect upon; before we can think accurately respecting any thing, we must know accurately all relating to it; and wheresoever our knowledge be complete, will our opinion be just.

Seeing, then, that just opinions are the result of just knowledge, and perceiving, as we must all perceive, how much confusion arises to society out of the conflicting opinions, which divide alike nations and families, into sects and parties, it is equally our interest and our duty, to aim at the acquisition of just knowledge, with a view to the formation of opinions. And, as we shall hereafter have occasion to observe, just practice being the result of just opinions, and human happiness being the certain result of just practice, it is equally our interest and our duty to aim at the formation of just opinions, with a view to the attainment of happiness.

We shall, therefore, open our investigations by an enquiry into the nature and object of just knowledge; and if we succeed in ascertaining these, we will farther examine the causes which at present impede our progress, and the means best calculated at once to remove such impediments, and to advance us in the course which it is our interest to pursue. .

If we consider man in comparison with other animals, we find him distinguished by one principle. This principle, which is shared by no other existence within the range of our observation, gives him all his pre-eminence. It constitutes, indeed, all his excellence. By its neglect or cultivation he remains ignorant and degraded, or becomes intelligent and happy; and, as he owes to it all that has elevated him above the brute in past time or at the present, so in it may he find rich hope and promise for the future.

Much does it behove us, then, earnestly to consider this distinguishing principle of our nature. Much does it behove us, to understand the fullness of its importance and its power, and to know that, as without it we should be as the beasts of the field, so with it we may rise in the

scale of being, until every vice which now degrades, every fear which unnerves, and every prejudice which enchains us, shall disappear beneath its influence.

I advert to the simple but all important principle of improvement. Weak as we are, compared to the healthy strength we are conscious would be desirable ; ignorant as we are, compared to the height, and breadth, and depth of knowledge which extends around us far as the universal range of matter itself; miserable as we are, compared to the happiness of which we feel ourselves capable; yet in this living principle we see nothing beyond or above us, nothing to which we or our descendants may not attain, of great, of beautiful, of excellent. But to feel the power of this mighty principle, to urge it forward in its course, and accelerate the change in our condition which it promises, we must awaken to its observation.

Are we yet awake to this? Do we know what we are, or have we ever asked ourselves what we might be? Are we even desirous of becoming wiser, and better, and happier? and, if desirous, are we earnestly applied to effect the change?

It is probable that some vague desire of advancing in knowledge pervades every bosom. We find every where some deference paid to the great principles of our nature, in the growing demand for schools and colleges. We seem to have discovered that the faculties of man demand care for their development; and that, like the marble of the quarry, he must be shaped and polished ere he will present the line of beauty.

But, alas ! here is the difficulty. If agreed that something must be done, we see but -darkly what that some thing is. While eager to be doing, we are still in doubt both as to the end to be attained and the means to be employed. While anxious to learn, we are but too often ignorant of the very nature of knowledge. We are unacquainted with her haunts and her habitation, and seek her where she is not to be found. It may be useful, then, before we engage in the labyrinth of learning, that we examine carefully what knowledge is.

If we ask this in our schools, we shall be told, that knowledge is an acquaintance with the structure of our own language; a familiarity with foreign, especially with dead languages. We shall, moreover, hear of history, geography, astronomy, etc. Do we ask the same in our colleges, we shall hear farther of law, medicine, surgery, theology, mathematics, chemistry, and philosophy, natural and mental: and we shall be farther told, that when a youth has mastered all these sounding names, and puzzled through all the learning, useful or useless, attached to them - he is well taught and thoroughly educated. It may be so. And yet may he be also very ignorant of what it most imports him to know. Nay, more! in despite of an intimate acquaintance with, all the most esteemed branches of knowledge, he may be utterly unacquainted with the object and nature of knowledge itself. Let us, then, enquire again, what knowledge is.

Is it not, in the first place, acquaintance with ourselves? and secondly, with all things to which we stand in relation?

How are we to obtain this acquaintance? By observation and patient enquiry.

What are the means we possess for this observation and enquiry? Our senses; and our faculties, as awakened and improved in and by the exercise of our senses.

Let us now examine what are the objects really submitted to the investigation of our senses.

These may be all embraced under the generic term matter, implying the whole of existence within the range of our inspection.

Were we to proceed minutely in our analysis, we should observe that matter, as existing around us, appears under three forms, the gaseous, the liquid, and the solid; and that under one or other of these forms may be accurately classed all that is submitted to our observation—all, in short, that we can see, hear, feel, taste, or smell. But to enter at present into such details would be foreign to our purpose.

I shall, therefore, pass on to observe, that the accurate and patient investigation of matter, in all its subdivisions, together with all its qualities and changes, constitutes a just education. And that in proportion as we ascertain, in the course of investigation, the real qualities and actual changes of matter, together with the judicious application of all things to the use of man, and influence of all occurrences on the happiness of man, so do we acquire knowledge. In other words, knowledge is an accumulation of facts, and signifies things known. In proportion, therefore, as the sphere of our observation is large, and our investigation of all within that sphere careful, in proportion is our knowledge.

The view of knowledge we have here taken is simple; and it may be observed, not in this case only, but in all others, accuracy and simplicity go hand in hand. All truth is simple, for truth is only fact. The means of attaining truth are equally simple. We have but to seek and we shall find; to open our eyes and our ears; without prejudice to observe; without fear to listen, and dispassionately to examine, compare, and draw our conclusions.

The field of knowledge is around, and about, and within us. Let us not be alarmed by sounding words, and let us not be deceived by them. Let us look to it is things which we have to consider. Words are, or, more correctly, should be, only the signs of things. I say they should be; for it is a most lamentable truth, that they are now very generally conceived to constitute the very substance of knowledge. Words, indeed, should seem at present contrived rather for the purpose of confusing our ideas, than administering to their distinctness and arrangement. Instead of viewing them as the shadows, we mistake them for the substance; and conceive that in proportion as we enlarge our vocabulary, we multiply our acquirements.

Vain, then, will be the attempt to increase our knowledge, until we understand where we are to look for it, and in what it consists. Here is the first stepping stone. Let our foot but firmly strike it, and our after progress is easy.

And in what lies the importance of this first step in human knowledge? In the accuracy which it brings to all our ideas. It places us at once on firm ground, introduces us into the field of real enquiry, and lays the reign of the in the hand of the judgment. Difficult were it to exaggerate the importance of the step which involve such consequences. Until we bring accuracy to our

thoughts, and, we may add, accuracy to the words employed for their expression—we can make no ‘progress. We may wander, indeed, and most certainly shall, wander, in various paths; but they will be paths of error. The straight broad road of improvement it will not be ours to tread, until we take heed unto our feet, and know always whither we are going.

Imagine—and how easy is it to imagine, when we have but to look around us or within ourselves—imagine the confusion of hopes, desires, ambitions, and expectations, with which the scholar enters, and but too often leaves, the halls of science. On entering them, he conceives that some mysterious veil, like the screen of the holy of holies, about to be withdrawn, and that he is to look at things far removed from real life, and raised far above the vulgar apprehension. On leaving them, he has his memory surcharged with a confusion of ideas, and a yet worse confusion of words. He knows, perhaps, the properties of ciphers and of angles; the names and classification of birds, fishes, quadrupeds, insects, and minerals; the chemical affinities of bodies; can measure star from star; analyze invisible substances; detail in chronological order the rise and fall of nations, with their arts, sciences, and sects of philosophy. He can do all this, and more ; and yet, perhaps, is there neither arrangement in his knowledge, distinctness in his ideas, nor accuracy in his language. And, while possessed of many valuable facts, there is blended with all and with each, a thousand illusions. Thus it is that so many wordy pedants, and hare-brained or shallow disputants, are sent forth from the schools of all countries, while those who do honour to their species, by rendering service in their generation, are, most generally, what is called self-taught. And the reason of this is evident. Our existing modes of education, being equally false and deficient, and the instruction of our schools full of fallacies, theories, and hypotheses, the more regularly a youth is trained in fashionable learning, the more confused is usually his perception of things, and the more prostrated his reason by the dogmatism of teachers, the sophism of words, and the false principles engrafted by means of pretended science, ostentatiously inculcated, or real science, erroneously imparted. While, on the other hand, a vigorous intellect, if stimulated by fortunate circumstances to enquiry, and left to accumulate information by the efforts of its own industry, though its early progress may be slow, and its aberrations numerous, yet in the free exercise of its powers, is more likely to collect accurate knowledge, than those who are methodically fed with learned error and learnedly disguised truth.

I shall have occasion, in a more advanced stage of our enquiries, to examine minutely the errors in the existing mode of instruction, and which are of a nature to perplex the human mind from infancy to age, and to make even learning an additional stumbling block in the way

of knowledge. For the present, I would confine myself to the establishing the simple position, that all real knowledge is derived from positive sensations.

In proportion to the number of senses we bring to bear upon an object, is the degree of our acquaintance with that object. Whatever we see, and feel, and attentively examine with all our senses, we know ; and respecting the things thus investigated, we can afterwards form a correct opinion. Wherever, respecting such things, our opinions are erroneous, it is where our investigation of them has been insufficient, or our recollection of them imperfect; and the only

certain way of rectifying the error, is to refer again to the object itself.

Things which we have not ourselves examined, and occurrences which we have not ourselves witnessed, but which we receive on the attested sensations of others, we may believe, but we do not know. Now, as these two modes of intellectual assent are generally, if not universally, confounded; and, as their accurate distinction is, in its consequences, of immense importance, I shall risk the straining of your attention for a few minutes, while I attempt its elucidation.

To select a familiar, and at the moment a pertinent example. The present audience know that an individual is now addressing them, because they see her person, and hear her voice. They may believe that some other speaker occupies the pulpit of a church in this town, if assured to that effect by a person of ordinary veracity; but, let the testimony of that person be as well substantiated in their opinion as possible, the fact received through his reported sensations, they would believe ; the fact of my presence, admitted upon their own sensations, they will know.

My hearers will understand that my object in presenting these definitions, is not to draw a mere verbal distinction, but a distinction between different states of the human mind; the distinction in words only being important, in that it is necessary to a clear understanding of the mental phenomena it is desirable to illustrate.

Did the limits of our present discourse permit such a development, or did I not apprehend to weary the attention, it would not be difficult to draw the line between knowledge and belief, and again between the different grades of belief, through all the varieties of intellectual assent, from the matter of fact certainty supplied by knowledge, down to the lowest stage of probability, supplied by belief. But having suggested the distinction, I must leave you to draw it for yourselves; requesting you only to observe—that, as your own positive sensations can alone give you knowledge of a thing, so is your belief of any thing stronger, in proportion as you can more accurately establish, or approach nearer to, the sensations of those whose testimony you receive.

Thus: if a friend, or, more particularly, if several friends, of tried veracity and approved judgment, relate to us a circumstance of which they declare themselves to have been attentive spectators—our belief is of the highest kind. If they relate a circumstance which they shall

have received from another, or from other individuals, for whose veracity and judgment they also vouch, our belief, though in a measure accorded, is very considerably weakened ; and so on, until, after a few more removes from the original sensations of the reported spectators, our belief is reduced to zero.

But farther, it is here of importance to observe that belief—that is, the belief of a well trained mind—can never be accorded to the attested sensations of others, should those attested sensations be contradicted by our own well established experience, or by the unvarying and agreeing experience of mankind. Thus: should one, or twenty, or a thousand individuals, swear to the fact of having seen a man, by effort of his unaided volition, raise himself through the air

to the top of a steeple in this city, we should believe —what? Not the eccentric occurrence, however attested, but one of two very common occurrences—either that the individuals were seeking to impose upon us, or that their own ignorant credulity had been deceived by false appearances.

But now let us suppose a case, very likely to be presented in form of an objection, although in reality capable of furnishing a forcible elucidation of the simple truth we are now attempting to illustrate. Let us suppose that some of our organs should become diseased—those of sight, for instance; and that we should, in consequence, imagine the appearance of an object, not perceptible to more healthy individuals. If the phantasy presented nothing uncommon in any of its parts, or inconsistent with the course of our previous sensations, we should at first, undoubtedly, yield credence to our eyes; until, in consequence, perhaps, of some incongruity, we should be led to appeal to our other senses, when, if they did not concur with the testimony of our vision, we should distinguish the appearance, immediately, for the effect of disease, and apply ourselves, on the instant, to its investigation and remedy.

But again, let us suppose (a case by no means uncommon in the history of human pathology) that two of our senses should be diseased—our sight and our hearing ; and that we should in consequence see the spectral illusion of a human being; and, farther, imagine such illusion to discourse with us. Our belief would be now strongly accorded to this two—fold evidence; but we should still have a resource in our sense of touch. Should this last not confirm the evidence supplied by our vision and our hearing, we should suspect, as in the former case, the health of our organs, and consult on the subject with an able physician.

But now let us suppose that all the organs of sense, in some individual, should become suddenly diseased, and sight, hearing, feeling, taste, and smell, should combine to cheat him into the belief of existences not perceptible to the more healthy sensations of his fellow creatures. I do not conceive that such an individual, however naturally strong or highly cultivated his judgment, and even supposing his judgment to retain its activity in the midst of the general disorder, could for any length of time struggle with the delusion, but must gradually yield intellectual assent to his diseased sensations, however incongruous these might be, or however at variance with past experience. I conceive that an individual thus diseased in all his organs of sense, must rapidly lose all control over his reasoning faculties, and present, consequently, to his fellow creatures, the afflicting spectacle of one labouring under mental insanity!

If we look to the unfortunate maniac, or to the sufferer tossing in fever delirium, we shall perceive how implicit the credence given to his diseased sensation. The phantoms which he hears, and feels, and sees, are all realities to him, and, as realities, govern his thoughts and decide his actions. How, in such cases, does the enlightened physician proceed? He does not argue with the incongruous ideas of his patient; he examines his disordered frame, and as he can restore healthy action to all its parts, so does he hope to restore healthy sensations to the body, and accurate ideas to the mind. Here, then, we see, in sickness as in health, our sensations supplying us with all our intellectual food. In fever, they supply us with dreams;

in health, if accurately studied, with knowledge.

The object of these observations is to show that as we can only know a thing by its immediate contact with our senses, so is all knowledge compounded of the accurately observed, accumulated, and agreeing sensations of mankind.

The field of knowledge, then, we have observed to be the field of nature, or of material existence around and within us. The number of objects comprised within the circle of human observation, is so multiplied, and the properties or qualities of these objects so diversified, that with view to convenient and suitable divisions in the great work of inspecting the whole, and also with a view to the applying more order and method in the arrangement of the facts collated in the wide field of nature, they have been classed under different heads, each of which we may call a branch of knowledge, or, more succinctly, a science.

Thus: do we consider the various living tribes which people the elements? We class our observations under the head of natural history. Do we direct our attention to the structure and mechanism of their bodies? We designate the results of our inspection under the heads anatomy and physiology. Do we trace the order of occurrences and appearances in the wide field of nature? We note them under natural philosophy. Do we analyze substances and search out their simple elements? chemistry. Do we apply ourselves to the measurement of bodies, or calculate the heights and distances of objects? Geometry. And so on, through all the range of human observation, extending from the relative position of the heavenly bodies, and accurate calculation of their courses, to the uses, habits, structure, and physiology of the delicate plant which carpets our earth.

Now, all the sciences, properly so called, being compounded of facts, ascertained or ascertainable by the sensations of each individual, so all that is not so ascertainable is not knowledge, only belief, and can never constitute for us matter of fact certainty, only greater or less probability. In elucidation, we might remark that the facts we glean, in the study of chemistry, supply us with knowledge; those received upon testimony, as in the study of history, supply us with probabilities, or with improbabilities, as it may be, and constitute belief.

Now, again--as our knowledge is supplied by our own individual sensations, and our belief by the attested sensations of others, it is possible, while pretending to communicate knowledge, only to communicate belief. This we know to be the system pursued in all our schools and 'colleges, where the truths of the most demonstrable sciences are presented under the disguise of oral or written lessons, instead of being exposed, in practical illustrations, to the eye, and the ear, and the touch, in the simple, incontrovertible fact. This method, while it tends to hide and perpetuate the errors of teachers, so does it also inculcate credulity and blind belief in the scholar, and finally establishes the conclusion in the mind, that knowledge is compounded of words, and signs, and intellectual abstractions, instead of facts and human sensations.

Greatly, very greatly to be desired, is a just mode of instruction. It would not only shorten the road of knowledge, it would carpet it with flowers. We should then tread it in childhood with smiles of cheerfulness; and, as we followed its pleasant course, horizon after horizon would

open upon us, delighting and improving our minds and feelings, through life, unto our latest hour. But if it is of the first importance to be launched aright in infancy, the moment we distinctly perceive what knowledge is, we may, at any age, start boldly for its attainment.

I have said, we may start boldly —ay! and there lies the surety of our success. If we bring not the good courage of minds covetous of truth, and truth only, prepared to hear all things, examine all things, and decide upon all things, according to evidence, we should do more wisely to sit down contented, in ignorance, than to bestir ourselves only to reap disappointment. But let us once look around upon this fair material world, as upon the book which it behooves us to read; let us understand, that in this book there are no puzzling mysteries, but a simple train of occurrences, which it imports us to observe, with an endless variety of substances and existences, which it imports us to study--what is there, then, to frighten us? What is there not, rather, to encourage our advance?

Yet how far are we from this simple perception of simple things! how far from that mental composure which can alone fit us for enquiry! How prone are we to come to the consideration of every question with heads and hearts pre-occupied! how prone to shrink from any opinion, however reasonable, if it be opposed to any, however unreasonable, of our own! How disposed are we to judge, in anger, those who call upon us to think, and encourage us to enquire? To question our prejudices seems nothing less than sacrilege; to break the chains of

our ignorance, nothing short of impiety!

Perhaps at this moment, she who speaks is outraging a prejudice—(shall I be forgiven the word?) Perhaps, among those who hear me, there are who deem it both a presumption and an impropriety for a woman to reason with her fellow creatures.

Did I know, of a surety, this prejudice to prevail among my hearers, I should, indeed, be disposed to reason with them. I should be tempted to ask, whether truth had any sex: and I should venture farther to ask, whether they count for nothing, for something, or for every thing, the influence of women over the destinies of our race.

Shall I be forgiven for adverting, most unwillingly, to myself? Having assumed an unusual place, I feel, that to my audience some explanation is due.

Stimulated in my early youth, by I know not what of pitying sympathy with human suffering, and by I know not what persuasion, that our race was not of necessity, born to ignorance, and its companion, vice, but that it possessed faculties and qualities which pointed to virtue and enjoyment; stimulated, at once, by this pity for the actual condition of man, and this hope of a possible melioration, I applied myself to the discovery of the causes of the one, and of the means for effecting the other.

I have as little the inclination to obtrude on you the process of investigation and course of observation I followed through the period of an eventful youth, as you would probably have to listen to them. Suffice it, that I have been led to consider the growth of knowledge, and

the equal distribution of knowledge, as the best—may I say, the only means for reforming the condition of mankind. Shall I be accused of presumption for imagining that I could be instrumental in promoting this, as it appears to me, good work? Shall I appear additionally

presumptuous for believing that my sex and my situation tend rather to qualify than to incapacitate me for the undertaking?

So long as the mental and moral instruction of man is left solely in the hands of hired servants of the public -- let them be teachers of religion, professors of colleges, authors of books, or editors of journals or periodical publications, dependent upon their literary labours for their daily bread, so long shall we hear but half the truth; and well if we hear so much. Our teachers, political, scientific, moral, or religious; our writers, grave or gay, are compelled to administer to our prejudices and to perpetuate our ignorance. They dare not speak that which, by endangering their popularity, would endanger their fortunes. They have to discover not what is true, but what is palatable; not what will search into the hearts and minds of their hearers, but what will open their purse strings. They have to weigh every sentiment before they hazard it, every word before they pronounce it, lest they wound some cherished vanity or aim at some favorite vice. A familiar instance will bring this home to an American audience.

I have been led to inspect, far and wide, the extensive and beautiful section of this country which is afflicted with slavery. I have heard in the cities, villages, and forests of this afflicted region, religious shepherds of all persuasions haranguing their flocks; and I have never

heard one bold enough to comment on the evil which saps the industry, vitiates the morals, and threatens the tranquility of the country. The reason of this forbearance is evident. The master of the slave is he who pays the preacher, and the preacher must not irritate his paymaster. I would not here be understood to express the opinion, that the preaching of religious teachers against slavery would be desirable. I am convinced of the contrary—convinced that it would be of direful mischief to both parties, the oppressor and the oppressed. To judge from the tone but too generally employed by religious writers in the northern states, where (as denunciation against the vice of the south risks no patronage and wins cheap credit for humanity) negro philanthropy is not so scarce—to judge, I say, from the tone employed by northern religionists, when speaking of their southern neighbours, and their national crime and affliction, one must suppose them as little capable of counselling foreign as home offenders—as little capable of advising in wisdom as of judging in mercy or speaking with gentleness. The harshest physician with which I am acquainted is the religious physician. Instead of soothing, he irritates; instead of convincing, he disgusts; instead of weighing circumstances, tracing causes, allowing for the bias of early example, the constraining force of implanted prejudice, the absence of every judicious stimulus, and the presence of every bad one; he arraigns, tries, convicts, condemns—himself accuser, jury, judge, and executioner; nobly immolating interests which are not his, generously commanding sacrifices which he has not to share, indignantly anathematizing crimes which he cannot commit, and virtuously kindling the fires of hell to consume sinners, to whose sins, as he is without temptation, so for whose sins he is without sympathy. I would not be understood, therefore, as regretting in this matter the supineness of the southern clergy; I

would only point it out to you, desirous that you should observe how well the tribe of Levi know when and where to smite, and when and where to spare !

And though I have quoted an instance more peculiarly familiar to Americans, every country teems with similar examples. The master vice, wherever or whatever it be, is never-touched. In licentious aristocracies, or to look no farther than the towns and cities of these states, the rich and pampered few are ever spared, or so gently dealt with, as rather agreeably to tickle the ear', than to probe the conscience, while the crimes of the greatly tempted, greatly suffering poor, are visited with unrelenting rigor.

Is any discovery made in science, tending to open to us farther the book of knowledge, and to purge our minds of superstitious beliefs in occult causes and unsubstantiated creeds--where has it ever found opposers--or, might we not say, persecutors? Even among our hired preachers and licensed teachers of old doctrines and old ways. Is any enquiry instituted into the truth of received opinions and the advantage of existing practice—who are the last to encourage it? nay, the foremost to cry out “ heresy !” and stop the mouth of knowledge? Who but those who live by the ignorance of the age, and the intolerance of the hour? Is any improvement suggested in our social arrangements, calculated to equalize property, labour, instruction, and enjoyment; to destroy crime by removing provocation; vice, by removing ignorance; and to build up virtue in the human breast by exchanging the spirit of self abasement for that of self respect--who are the foremost to treat the suggestions as visionary, the reform as impossible! Even they who live by the fears and the vices of their fellow creatures; and who obtain their subsistence on earth by opening and shutting the door of heaven.

Nor, as we have seen, are our licensed and pensioned teachers the only individuals interested in disguising the truth. All who write for the public market, all who plead in our courts of law, all who harangue in our halls of legislature, all who are, or who aspire to be, popular servants or popular teachers of the people, all are compelled to the support of existing opinions, whether right or wrong --all, more or less, do, and, more or less, must, pander to the weaknesses, vices, and prejudices of the public, who pays them with money or applause.

I have said not only that they do, but that they must; and most assuredly they must conciliate the popular feeling, or forego the popular favour. Here is intended no satire upon any individuals, professions, nor employments. The object is merely to expose a fact, but a fact highly important to be known; that as, to be popular, men must not speak truths, so, when we would hear truths, we must seek them from other mouths and other pens than those which are dependent upon popular patronage, or which are ambitious of popular admiration.

And here, then, is the cause why I have presumed to reason with my fellow creatures ; why, in my earliest years,- I devoted myself to the study of their condition, past and present; why I searched into. their powers and their capabilities, examined their practice, and weighed their opinions; and why, when I found these both wanting, I volunteered to declare it. I believe that I see some truths important for my fellow beings to know; I feel that I have the courage and the

independence to speak that which I believe; and where is the friend to his species that will not say, "Happy, most happy shall it be for human kind, when all independent individuals, male or female, citizens or foreigners, shall feel the debt of kindness they owe to their fellow beings, and fearlessly step forth to reveal unbought truths and hazard

unpopular opinions."

Until this be done, and done ably, fearlessly, and frequently, the reign of human error must continue; and, with "human error, human vice, and human suffering. The advocates of just knowledge must be armed with courage to dare all things, and to bear all things, for the truths they revere; and to seek, as they may only find, the reward of their exertions in the impression, great or little, slow or rapid, as it may be, which their exertions may produce on public opinion, and, through the public opinion, on the public practice.

We have now sufficiently considered, so far as I have found possible in a single discourse on so wide a topic, the main subject of our introductory enquiries: viz. the nature and object of just knowledge. We have examined, also, some of the errors vulgarly entertained on the subject, and many of the impediments which now obstruct our advances in the road of improvement. We have seen that just knowledge is easy of acquirement, but that few are interested in revealing its simple principles; while many are driven by circumstances to interpret or dissemble them. We have remarked that, to accelerate the progress of our race, two means present themselves; a just system of education, and a fearless spirit of enquiry; and that while the former would remove all difficulties from the path of future generations, the latter would place far in advance even the present. We have also observed on the advantage which would accrue to mankind, if all independent individuals would volunteer the task, for which appointed teachers and professional men are now but too frequently unëtt, by devoting themselves to the promulgation of truth, without regard to fashionable prejudice. I have been led, also, incidentally to advert to the influence exerted over the fortunes of our race by those who are too öben overlooked in our social arrangements and in our civil rights— I allude to women.

Leaving to a future opportunity the more complete development of the important subject, we have this evening approached—the nature of all knowledge—as well as the equally important subject of youthful education, I shall, at our next meeting, consider the other two enumerated means of improvement, viz. by free enquiry. And as this is for us of the present generation the only means, so shall I endeavour to show how much it is our interest, and how imperiously it is our duty, to improve it to the uttermost.

It is with delight that I have distinguished, at each successive meeting, the increasing ranks of my own sex. Were the vital principle of human equality universally acknowledged, it would be to my fellow beings without regard to nation, class, sect, or sex, that I should delight to address myself. But until equality prevail in condition, opportunity, and instruction, it is every where to the least favored in these advantages, that I most especially and anxiously incline.

Nor is the ignorance of our sex matter of surprise, when efforts, as violent as unrelaxed, are every where made for its continuance.

It is not as of yore. Eve puts not forth her hand to gather the fair fruit of knowledge. The wily serpent now hath better learned his lesson ; and, to secure his reign in the garden, beguileth her not to eat. Promises, entreaties, threats, tales of wonder, and, alas! tales of horror, are all poured in her tender ears. Above, her agitated fancy hears the voice of a gail in thunders; below, she sees the yawning pit; and, before, behind, around, a thousand phantoms, conjured from the prolific brain of insatiate priestcraft, confound, alarm, and overwhelm her reason!

Oh ! were that worst evil withdrawn which now weighs upon our race, how rapid were its progress in knowledge! Oh ! were men--and, yet more, women, absolved from fear, how easily and speedily and gloriously would they hold on their course in improvement ! The difficulty is

not to convince, it is to win attention. Could truth only be heard, the conversion of the ignorant were easy. And well do the hired supporters of error understand this fact. Well do they know that if the daughters of the present, and mothers of the future generation, were to drink of the living waters of knowledge, their reign would be ended— “their occupation gone.” So well do they know it, that, far from obeying to the letter the command of their spiritual leader, “Be ye fishers of men,” we find them every where fishers of women. Their own sex, old and young, they see with indifference swim by their nets ; but closely and warily are their meshes laid, to entangle the female of every age.

Fathers and husbands ! do ye not also understand this fact? Do ye not see how, in the mental bondage of your wives and fair companions, ye yourselves are bound ? Will ye fondly sport yourselves in your imagined liberty, and say, “it matters not if our women be mental slaves?” Will ye pleasure yourselves in the varied paths of knowledge, and imagine that women, hoodwinked and unawakened, will make the better servants and the easier playthings? They are greatly in error who so strike the account; as many a bankrupt merchant and sinking mechanic, not to say drowning capitalist, could bear witness.

But, setting aside dollars and cents, which men, in their present uncomfortable state of existence, are but too prone exclusively to regard, how many nobler interests of the mind and the heart cry. “treason!” to this false calculation? At our next meeting, we shall consider these interests, which will naturally present themselves during our investigations on the subject of free enquiry. In what just knowledge consists we have cursorily examined; to put ourselves in the way of attaining that knowledge, be our next object.