CHAPTER IV.

THE PRINCIPLE OF THOUGHT.

I.

1. FROM these types of thinking let us return to thought itself, and note the higher principle of its existence. Not content with enjoying the light of day, let us look to the sun whence emanates that light. From thinking we pass to the principle of all thinking and all knowing. Truth is of the mind. It is the equation between the intellect and its object. The three elements of every proposition — of every truth apprehended — are subject, object, and their relation. Now, that which we apprehend as truth is truth not because we apprehend it as such, but because it exists as such in the light of the Unchanging Truth that is independent of all modes of apprehension. Without that light our intellectual vision were as darkened as our bodily eyes without the light of the sun. This is the teaching of great thinkers and great saints. In this simple manner does St. Augustine express himself: "If what you say is seen to be true by both of us, and what I say is seen to be true by both of us, where, I would ask, do we see it? Assuredly, neither you see it in me nor I in you; but we both

see it in that unchanging truth which is above our minds."[1] "But," adds another great Doctor of the Church, the angelic Thomas of Aquin, "unchanging truth is contained in the eternal reasons of things, and therefore our soul knows all things as true in those reasons."[2] The intellectual light by which our mind apprehends and pronounces upon truth — that which makes it evident to us that two and two make four, or that it is impossible for a thing to be and not be at the same time, or that every effect has a cause, — that light is in some sense a participation in the Uncreated Light that contains in itself the eternal principles of things and the eternal reasons for all actual and possible truths and existences. Here we have the true source both of the knowledge we possess and the intellects by which we know. The human intellect so illumined is the principle of thought. Such an aspect of our thinking brings us nearer to God. The light of his Divine countenance is stamped upon us.[3] It guides our reason; it strengthens our understanding; it illumines our thoughts; it places its impress on all that is true, all that is good, and all that is beautiful.[4]

[1] *Confess.* lib. xii. cap. xxv. § 35.

[2] *Summa.* Pars prima. Quæst. lxxxiv. art. v.

[3] Signatum est super nos lumen vultus tui, Domine. Psalm iv. 6.

[4] Per ipsam sigillationem divini luminis in nobis omnia demonstrantur. *Summa*, loc. cit. Whilst the light as from God is uncreated, St. Thomas holds that as received by the human intellect it is participated in in a finite mode, and therefore as it exists in the soul it is a created light. He holds this as against the theory of the *intellectus agens* of Averroës. See his *De Unitate Intellectus contra Averroïstas.*

2. From this elevated point of view one can more easily perceive the true relations of all knowledge, be it in the natural or in the supernatural order. Utterly groundless is the position of the agnostic who rejects as impossible a divine revelation. Since the very light of our natural reason — that primary condition of all knowledge and all certainty — comes from God, why may not the same all-powerful Author, if it so pleases his infinite wisdom, communicate other truths of an order beyond the reach of human discovery? Such a communication were only an additional ray from the same inexhaustible source. The light of that ray may be more dazzling, its warmth more burning, its energy more vitalizing, but it is still a ray from the same Divine Light that illumines this world. And could our weak intellectual vision only bear its full brilliancy we would recognize it as of a piece with other rays less brilliant. For in that Divine Essence whence all truths emanate, there are no broken aspects of things, no wastes of knowledge, no doubt or darkness, no opposition or contradiction of views, nothing of all that belongs to our feeble and limited intelligence; but all those truths that we apprehend in a partial sense, and under various æsthetic, literary, and scientific aspects, are therein harmonized into a single whole.

II.

1. Taking our stand here we shall also be in a better position to judge of the intellectual and so-

cial deviations from old lines of thought and action. The flood of light that a new theory, or a new idea, or an additional aspect of an old truth, throws upon us is for the moment too much for us. We are bedimmed with its splendor. We have therefore to grope in the dark as though there were no light. Men are slow to conceive an idea; slower still to grasp its whole import. It takes many minds and a long period of time to mature a thought. In consequence, what we regard as deviations, when the thing is not evidently false, may be really the shortest route to the whole truth. No man knows where the error ends and at what point the truth begins in any of the doubtful issues that agitate the world. All we may be certain of is that the truth shall finally prevail. It remains for us but to wait and hold firmly by the old moorings till the atmosphere clears and we see our way. The truth suffers most from those over-zealous defenders whose zeal is not according to knowledge; who are guided more by their prejudices than by any enlightened views; who beat the air with wild and whirling words; whose acquaintance with the new is fragmentary and at second-hand; who consider a training in one branch of science or letters sufficient preparation to cope with athletes in every other branch; finally, who enter the arena possessed of no other weapons than dogmatism and presumption. These men mislead the weak-minded; they bring confusion into the ranks; they impede the action of competent thinkers and shut them out from achieving good; they set up difficulties of

their own making, and knock down objections no living opponent of faith and revelation ever dreamed of putting forth. These are the friends from whom truth may well pray to be delivered.

2. Nor is there much to be feared from the attacks — even those of them made in good faith — upon revealed religion. The opponents the most competent have as a rule overlooked some essential element in their calculations; or they have been overhasty in drawing their conclusions; or they have misread the document; or they have made an erroneous assumption in their premises. Careful study and research will set the matter right. Less sincere opponents are too prone to talk about matters whereof they know nothing to injure any but the fickle and the superficial. The accurate thinker makes due allowance for all such shortcomings. By patient self-possession of one's soul may one escape being carried away by the cant of the hour or the intellectual fashion of the day. Because a theory is popular, it does not follow that it is also true. Disease is catching, not health. And so too may error gain proselytes faster than truth. Moreover, the very newness of a new theory or a new doctrine tends to its exaggeration. It stands out in undue prominence. It compels a readjustment of our previous knowledge. We see not at first sight its right relations with other subjects; we grasp only part of the truth, or we overestimate its importance, or we fall short of its true position in our calculations, and all this misleads us in our reasonings upon it. But be it remembered that this mental confusion is only a passing phase.

3. The present generation may not apprehend the real import of a new doctrine or a new theory; at most only a few of the master-minds rightly measure its entire course; but those coming after us, being born into the new light, shall have become accustomed to it, and shall have learned to place the truth on its proper basis and in its most telling position. The age devours all manner of knowledge with equal avidity, be the knowledge wholesome or be the knowledge poisonous. Some it digests and assimilates into the blood and bone and muscle of its thoughts; some it rejects; some again of a poisonous character throws it into fevers and excitements and produces blotches and plague-spots. But it is only the truth that is life-giving and strengthening. All else is imbued with the seeds of death and destruction. The truth alone survives.

III.

1. As all the years of a person's life are wrought into the formation of his nature and character, so does it take all the past centuries of a people's existence to make it that which it is at present. And the characteristic spirit of a people gives tone and color to the spirit of each individual of that people. This remark leads us to some very sugestive reflections. We all of us are the outcome of past influences. Generations have lived

and thought and acted that each of us might be what he is. Were any link in the chain of heredity lacking we would be different in aptitude, in capacity, in very form and appearance. The absence of some faculty, the feebleness of some disposition in some one or other of our ancestors were sufficient to vary the results in the person of each of us. Nature acts with persistence; slowly, it is true, but with the sureness of fate. She never breaks the mould. Types are produced and apparently vanish, perhaps for ages; but they are not lost; all at once, when least expected, they replace their impress on countenance and character and help to shape the course of life and action. Every generation weakens or strengthens some one point or other in character or disposition, in tone or temperament, in intellect or soul. Each individual has his personality stamped with the weight and persistent force of his ancestry. This is an elementary truth; we cannot ignore it, and it is wisdom to recognize and accept its inevitableness, and shape our lives so as to strengthen in ourselves the sources of our strength and weaken whatever contains an element of social or personal disorganization. As it took long periods of heat and of glacial action, of attrition and denudation, of sinking and rising of the earth's surface, and consequent changes of plant and animal life in order to prepare this world for man's habitation, so is it in the throes of ages that the hereditary tendencies of the present generation have had their birth.[1]

[1] A friend suggests that these remarks savor of Evolutionism.

2. What we say of man's organic growth and development applies with no less force to the formation of his thought. Around him and within him, in the very air he breathes, is the wisdom of all past ages and civilizations. No thought is isolated. It has sprung from some previous seed; it has fed upon other prior thoughts; at their expense has it been nourished and has it waxed strong. We think as we do now, because past generations thought as they did in their day; because Greece thought as she did, because Rome thought as she did, and because Greece and Rome have been our educators and the educators of Europe for the past twenty centuries. Truths and expressions that were then new and startling have since become commonplace. That which was the exclusive property of a thoughtful few has with time filtered into the general intelligence.

3. Another source of our ideas is that which results from the transmitted experiences of past generations. One may hear from men who have never

It is a question of truth and not of names. Now every theory that has ever laid hold of the brain of man has done so by reason of some truth contained in it. And Evolutionism is no exception. How much or how little is its share of truth neither we nor its advocates are in position to define. However, it so happens that this is one of the very doctrines the Evolutionists have ignored. Mr. Frederick Harrison thus berates them for it: "Even the philosophers of Evolution consistently forget that the generation of men to be are being daily evolved out of the whole of the generations that have been. Evolutionists are the readiest of all to tear up whole regions of human history as waste paper, or to discharge the product of vast ages of man into the deep, as some dangerous excrement of the race." *Nineteenth Century*, November, 1880.

learned how to read or write the wisest and best sayings in one's Horace. The experiences of life and the workings of the human heart are confined to no privileged order of men. Every people has its proverbs embodying the lessons that time and men's failings and successes alike have handed down. The fables attributed to Æsop were the delight of youth and of old age in Greece; transplanted by Phædrus, they took firm root in Rome; recast into inimitable verse by Lafontaine, they became classic thought in France; but prior to Lafontaine, or Phædrus, or Æsop they had been the daily lessons of children on the banks of the Ganges. They crystallized in a convenient and attractive form the worldly wisdom and the common experiences of mankind; long before they were inscribed in books they had been the joint inheritance of a faithful and tenacious traditionary knowledge.

4. Since, then, the past has contributed so largely to make us what we are — since it supplies the very atmosphere of our thinking and the conditions under which our brain works — it behooves each and all of us to think and read in a temper and mood in keeping with the great thinkers of former times. It is by a wise, discriminating use of past thought in connection with the present that we may hope to secure definite and profitable results in our thinking. This is the legitimate function of books. Only in so far as they supply food for our mental activity do they avail. And for this reason they are not to be overestimated, nor is the worth of a

man's opinions to be measured by the number of volumes that he has read. Nor should we be too hasty to despise the views of men limited in their acquaintance with books. It is the besetting mistake of students. To them I would say: You will find in the world men who have not had your opportunities for book-knowledge; men who have passed through life with open eyes and wide-awake minds; who have read long and diligently in the great book of Nature, be it that of man or that of plant and animal, and who have drawn therefrom lessons of wisdom and usefulness; you will find these men sound in their judgments on every topic within the sphere of their experience; you will find their views of actions and events clear, just, enlightened; still you may be inclined to make but slight estimate of their attainments because they cannot back up their opinions by quotation from some one or other of your favorite authors. This were a serious blunder which the experience of advancing years and a like knowledge of the world will enable you to correct. Your proper and most profitable course would be to modify, strengthen, improve your crude theories by their practical knowledge. What need of their knowing that this man or that wrote the same thought that they thoroughly realize. You tell them that you read their opinion in such and such a classic, and they may well reply in the words of La Bruyère: "I believe it on your word; but I have given the opinion as my own. May I not think a true thing in my own way, after these great authors have thought it in theirs, and

since others shall still think it after I have passed?"[1] Much has been written of late years with the view of determining the extent of Shakespeare's learning. I would ask, to what purpose? Does it not suffice to know that Shakespeare's own mind was fertile enough to conceive, capacious enough to contain, creative enough to originate and send forth, fresh and vigorous in the full bloom and maturity of exquisite expression, all the great thoughts arising from the hearts of all the great poets of all times? In the presence of such a wealth of genius books and authorities go for very little; not that they are to be despised; nor did Shakespeare despise his Plutarch and his Holinshed, his Gower, his Florio's Montaigne, and his Chapman's Homer; but they were in his hands simply the dead men's bones over which the spirit of his genius moved, and forthwith the bones knit together, and flesh grew upon them, and he breathed into them a soul, and they stood erect living creations, distinct personalities, each with a will and a destiny, and the responsibility of his deeds pressing upon him and stamping his character forever. In a like spirit should we all of us learn the use of books. They are aids only inasmuch as they help our thinking.

IV.

1. Right thinking is a habit; it is therefore to be acquired by practice. One may say here and

[1] *Les Caractères*, t. i. p. 118.

now: "I will begin from this hour to think correctly," but it does not follow that forthwith one will become a profound thinker. There remains to consider the ways and means by which to arrive at this habit; one must look to the lets and hindrances that beset one's course; then by slow, patient, and earnest effort one may finally succeed in controlling one's intellect. Every thought has its cause; every action, its motive; every conclusion, its premise. Therefore, the essence of right thinking is this: that he who so thinks is not content with the last word of a chain of thought; he examines the process by which that chain has been constructed; he determines the value of the principles from which the chain starts; he regards the thought in all its bearings and defines its true position in the nature of things.

2. Again, that is the most efficient and best trained thinking which is the most continuous. But continuous trains of thought are possible only with an economizing of brain power. Anything tending to weaken that power, or to scatter it over a large field of observation, is a hindrance to sound thinking. In this category is to be ranked all reading in which fancy or curiosity is allowed to run away with reason and understanding. It were as easy for a man to be successful in life by a constant change of occupation, as for one with no control over his mind to become a profound thinker. I would not be understood as discouraging the reading of works purely imaginative. They have their use. I touch on such works simply to

caution against their abuse. To profit by them one should bring to their perusal a well-defined standard of excellence, a cultivated taste that clearly discriminates between a novel or poem of real merit and the trashy works that now glut the book-market, and a decided and firm resolve to waste neither time nor talent upon reading that is useless or injurious. The man or boy that allows novel-reading — or in fact aimless reading of any description — to become a passion with him, thereby saps his mental, his moral, and his physical energy as surely as the opium-eater destroys this threefold energy by the inordinate use of opium, or the drunkard by excessive drink.

3. Another bane of solid and fruitful thought is reverie. It consists chiefly in a loss of control over the mind and the affections and a total abandonment of the soul to revel and become merged in Nature. It is the passion of delicate, sensitive, and sentimental young men and women. There is for such souls a yearning to commune with Nature and lose themselves in a vague sentiment. Victor Hugo interprets this feeling when he tells us that in the solitude of the woods he feels the presence of a Great Being who listens to him and loves him —

"Je sens quelqu'un de grand qui m'écoute et qui m'aime." [1]

Indeed, one of the most clearly uttered messages that Nature gives to man is that there is a Something beyond the tangible and the visible. It is a message to which every sensitive heart re-

[1] *Contemplations*, liv. iii. 24.

sponds. "There is in man," says Chateaubriand, "an instinctive melancholy, which makes him harmonize with the scenery of Nature." And the same author speaks of "the immensity of the seas, which seems to give an indistinct measure of the greatness of our souls, and which excites a vague desire to quit this life, that we may embrace all Nature and become united with its Author." [1] The bond of sympathy between man and Nature, when properly regulated, is strong and wholesome. There is a soothing effect in the placid lake. A troubled heart becomes calm in the serene presence of mountain scenery. The eternal peace of which every snow-clad summit speaks enters and possesses the soul and lifts it above the worries and annoyances of every-day life. Such communion is beneficial. But the reverie in which the soul becomes diffused through Nature and lost in a weak sentiment, however refined it be, is still sensual and therefore demoralizing to the soul and disintegrating of all robustness of faculties. The faculties of the soul should, in all their functions, operate according to their nature and in their proper order. In reverie that order is broken. The reason, which should always remain supreme and always govern, becomes dethroned and merged in the imagination. Intellectual disorder leads to many other disorders in the moral and spiritual worlds. By all means let us commune with Nature and learn the lessons she would teach us, always bearing in mind that God is her Author and ours, that He

[1] *Génie du Christianisme*, p. ii. liv. iv. chap. i.

is ever present in the material universe, acting in it with a preservative and a coöperative act; acting in it most intimately, but distinct from it; acting behind the ultimate atom of material substance, beneath the primal energy of material force; acting always and containing in Himself as Archetype, in all their fitness and beauty of perfection, the ideals of all good and beautiful things in this world. In this manner shall we avoid the evils of reverie.

4. No less pernicious and equally to be avoided is the opposite extreme of being too introspective. There is such an evil as thinking too much about one's thinking. It is a morbid disposition. It impedes all serious thought and all earnest action. That is pure dilettanteism which amuses itself with itself in its workings. To meddle with the springs of thought whilst thinking is like interfering with the process of digestion whilst eating, or measuring the strain and waste of nerve and muscle whilst acting. Earnest work is unconscious work; so is earnest thinking unconscious thinking. This will be all the more evident when we shall have pursued the subject of thought as a habit upon the fields of literature and of science.

CHAPTER V.

LITERARY AND SCIENTIFIC HABITS OF THOUGHT.

I.

1. THERE is a wide difference between the habits of thought engendered by literary pursuits and those begotten of scientific studies. The difference is as marked as are the diverse objects of thought. Literature we know to be personal in its nature, in its method, and to a great extent in its object. Science is impersonal, both in its subject-matter and in its treatment. Literature deals with persons and things so far as they affect our humanity; every piece of written composition that appeals to the emotional element in our nature may be regarded as literature. Science deals with persons and things as they are in themselves, or in coördinated relations. It examines, investigates, discusses from an impersonal point of view; utterly regardless of individual bias, it gropes its way through the entanglements and environments of a subject-matter, and cautiously passes from the known to the unknown. Science, in a word, is concerned with the true as true. Its object is truth. Literature, on the other hand, ranges over a wider field. It may be personal or impersonal, subjective or objective, as best suits its inclina-