

Essay on Truth

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1880

**"A KNOWLEDGE OF TRUTH IS BEST FOR HUMAN WELFARE,
THEREFORE—**

To Observe Enquire Read and Think in order to find Truth is the Highest Duty of Man."

It would appear to a careless observer, on glancing at the above text, that there is very little left to say upon the subject beyond what is there stated; but if we take a more minute notice of the ideas contained in it, we shall see that in such few words, thoughts lay hidden which would, if fully explained and commented on, fill volumes. We shall carefully proceed to analyse the motto—first of all asking ourselves the oft repeated question, "What is Truth?" Various have been the definitions given of its character, and many the thinkers who have striven to describe it. We do not intend to dictate to the reader of this essay what *Truth* actually is, for we consider that there is far more to be learnt before man can give an approximately correct definition of its real character in *all* its varied phases. Our intention is merely to show that if we want to find the truth of anything or everything, we must search it out for ourselves; not merely asking another what we wish to know and then resting satisfied with the answer but making ass of the information to test its real value, and discarding it if it does not harmonise with our reason after being carefully weighed in our minds without bias or headstrong aversion.

This great question has puzzled many a wise head, and so varied and important are its bearings, that we hesitate not to say it will be food for philosophers of all time. It is a subject of such vast extent that what little progress we may make in its acquirement is scarcely noticeable, for it seems to keep continually beyond our grasp; and, in fact, so apparent was this to the ancient philosophers that many of them actually declared that it was not within man's power to find; that try hard as he may he never could obtain truth; and even allowing that he could do so, he would not then be certain that he had possession of it. This is going to extremes indeed, but we must remember that extreme views help to extend and develop human thought, and are equally as beneficial as the most impartial views to the proper understanding of truth. We hold the opinion that although man may not be capable of knowing all truth, still when he has the truth he is capable of appreciating its presence, or what would be the use of his senses? We know full well that nothing in nature is made without a purpose, and our perceptive faculties are no exception to this universal rule. For this reason it is man's duty to analyse carefully everything with which his ideas are brought in contact. This brings us to the first proposition of our text, "A

knowledge of Truth is best for human welfare.” It will be observed that the statement does not simply say that *truth* is best; but it goes on to say that a *knowledge* of truth is best. It is no use having a machine without knowing how to use it, nor an electric telegraph without knowing how to communicate through its agency—the knowledge of its method of working and general management, is what is required. And the same argument applies to truth. Truth is of little or no use to man unless he has a knowledge of its existence and the proper method of applying it. For instance, of what use would be the truths revealed to us by the telescope if we did not properly understand their significance, and the uses to which discoveries effected by their aid might be put for the benefit of humanity? We shall further illustrate our remarks by noting one or two of the benefits conferred on the race by the discoveries of Astronomy.

The science of astronomy has played an important part in the history of man’s civilization—both for good and evil—eventually for the former alone. In early times the study of astronomy was confined to a few, and not a remarkably sensible few either. It was then used (under the name of astrology) as a means of divining a person’s future welfare—an extensive system of fortune telling. In this stage of its history it plunged man into a state of ignorance and superstition; the weakest of mankind were played upon by the more enlightened and avaricious, merely for the sake of pecuniary gain and generally as a system of earning a livelihood. Knowledge was hindered and superstition reigned. Men did not trouble about the affairs of life, beyond obtaining their daily bread, and asking their future lot of a set of men almost as ignorant and superstitious as themselves. We are told that in those times ignorance was almost universal, and that the little knowledge that existed was confined to a select few—a small portion of the aristocracy. Out of the ignorance which then existed many strange beliefs have sprung, some of which exist even to his day; for instance: in some foreign lands eclipses are viewed as an omen of evil. Amongst the Chinese an eclipse is a cause for great alarm, for they believe that the sun and moon are being devoured by dragons, and make all possible noise with drums, gongs, and brass kettles to frighten the monsters away. In many uncivilized lands similar views are held. But these beliefs, singular as they are, are not confined to the uncivilized alone; we find superstition rampant amongst ourselves. It is a common belief that the moon is the cause of lunacy; that scientific discoveries are often the work of the devil; and many more notions equally absurd. But, as we have before said, these beliefs chiefly exist amongst the ignorant, and astrology is almost a thing of the past. We have mentioned the state of society when ignorance reigned supreme. Let us now calmly watch Truth, which, like the rising sun, gently ascends from the horizon of superstition through which it has almost passed. Watching carefully, we note the gradual development of intellect in its attempts to unravel the mysteries of the stars. First a few shepherds mark the relative positions of the stars on the soft sands. Presently, more interest appears to be taken in a study, so sublime; and men give more thought to it. Chaldean shepherds are superseded by the cultured. One after another discoveries are made, upsetting false theories and giving correct and useful ones in their places. The Governments of Greece and Egypt give their aid to its development. Great men arise who attempt to explain the motions of the heavenly bodies upon the theory that the world is fixed in the centre of space, and that the stars are moving round it; but this theory, founded, as it is, on fiction, has to give way before the searching glance of a Copernicus, who, in spite of the persecution and hatred with which he is received makes the bold assertion that the world is moving with the planets around the sun. People cannot believe it. They ask how it is, if the world is turning round, that they do not, fall off when it is turned upside down. Now, with a spirit almost unequalled, the brave Kepler comes to the front, and proves after years of toilsome and

unceasing labour that the theory of Copernicus is correct. But all is not yet finished. It still waits to be accounted for how the earth manages to keep its inhabitants from falling to oblivion. Kepler, who applies a theory of attraction to certain phenomena of nature, leaves it to the master mind of Newton to apply this rule, without discrimination to every particle of matter in existence; and after mathematical demonstration of the correctness of his reasoning, proclaims it to the world. And thus truth rises. But, the reader may ask, "What good has all this done to man?" It has done this! It has taught him, in the first place, that a thing is not necessarily true because someone has said it is so. Further, that the truth cannot be arrived at without labour—that it is man's duty to try and find the truth; and when found, not to hoard it to himself as a miser does his gold, but to give it to the world for the benefit of humanity, so that his knowledge may be a foundation for other minds to build their knowledge upon. The force of our remarks are amply exemplified in the case of the question as to the fixity of the earth. What have been the consequences of these grand discoveries? Why! the trading of priestcraft upon human credulity has been nipped in the bud and almost annihilated, not withstanding the vain efforts of the early Fathers, consequently giving man that liberty of thought which his nature so unsparingly demands.

Scientific discovery has also been greatly assisted by the disclosures of Geology. It is mainly by this science that most of the old legends connected with the history of this earth have been swept away. (In remarking upon these myths, or what we believe to be such, we know that we are treading upon dangerous ground; for many have their cherished fancies, and if anyone attempts to upset them, it wounds like an arrow but we ask for such nothing more than an impartial and unprejudiced hearing, hoping for correction if we state anything wrongly, and the credit which we deserve if we speak the truth. Our intention is to state what we honestly believe to be the truth, and to show others the way to do the same, for

"The Truth is Truth, where'er 'tis found,
On Christian or on heathen ground").

One of the old myths we shall more particularly notice, it being a common feature amongst the beliefs of various nations. We refer to the story of an universal deluge. A short time back anyone attempting to deny the truth of this legend in a Christian community would have been stigmatised as a blasphemous and an opponent of the Word of God. This state of things is happily departing, and mankind are gradually discarding those old stories which cannot stand the test of reason—stories so ancient that they have no reliable records of who the real authors of them were, and which, by the searches made by modern theologians and scientists, are in many cases distinctly proved to be of different authorship than that ascribed to them. This legend of the universal deluge has a seat, as is now well known, amongst most of the nations of the world. We find it amongst the Chaldeans, the Jews, (the Christian and Mahometan stories being derived from the latter), and in America, and various parts of the world. Many works have been written upon the subject, both antagonistic and defensive; amongst the former being the works of such eminent men as Lyell, Clodd, Bishop Colenso (of the Church of England), who, in spite of his being in such a high position, was, out of love for the truth, compelled to openly avow his total disbelief of these stories; and so ably has he defended his position that no one but the most prejudiced or ill-informed could possibly believe in the story after hearing the arguments that have been brought forward by himself and others to refute it.

Many other foolish beliefs have been uprooted by the revelations of Geology, amongst which are the ridiculous stories told in connection with the creation of the world, the origin of life upon its surface, the time which has elapsed since the creation, and the antiquity of man. In past times,

when science was in its infancy, it was the common idea to believe that the world was created in a strange manner, only five or six thousand years ago, and that man suddenly appeared on its surface a few days later. The revelations of science, however, have taught man to be in this matter, as in everything else, cautious and enquiring, and have shown him conclusively that man has existed on this earth hundreds of thousands of years—the time of his first appearance being generally estimated at one million of years! It has shown, also, that the world could not have been created in one week, the time usually supposed to have elapsed, but that, like everything else in nature, its growth has been slow and orderly, and that it must have taken millions of years to perform its varied evolutions of matter. There are still many who doubt these statements; but one thing is certain—although they may be wrong in some minor points, they are built upon the strong foundations of truth; and though a few useless ornaments may crumble away, the edifice itself still remains ready to be re-adorned with facts more substantial and incontrovertible; and though men may close their ears to the voice of reason, they do themselves more harm than good, and stifle those glorious faculties for research with which nature has so plentifully endowed them.

”The proper study of mankind is man,” is a well-worn maxim, and one that, although quoted o’er and o’er, is always welcome to the ear. When man can properly appreciate the value of this study his progress will be far more rapid and beneficial. The more Physiology is understood the happier does man live. A great many valuable lessons can be learnt from it. He can learn how to save his fellow-creatures from agony, and often prevent a premature death; can discover the injurious effects of poisonous stimulants upon his constitution; can analyse every part of his body in order to have a better knowledge of its functions than he could by merely watching its effects; and, finally, can make laws—laws in accordance with nature’s workings, which shall keep his health intact, and cause him to find that ”life is real, life is earnest,” and that it can only be properly enjoyed and appreciated by being assisted instead of being misunderstood. Medicine was tolerably well understood amongst the ancients, and they paid especial attention to the benefits to be derived from healthful exercises. Later on, however, in the Middle Ages, people did not pay proper attention to their bodies; they were uncleanly and intemperate in their habits, and did not pay any attention to the ventilation of their houses, nor the sanitary conditions generally of the towns and villages in which they dwelt. And what was the result? They were visited on all sides by famine, disease, and fever; and in the fourteenth century were visited with the terrible Black Death, the horrors of which the pen of a Milton could not describe, nor the pencil of a Doré illustrate. But men are now living in an age of science and they have reason to be thankful for their good fortune. A man may now live in comparative happiness with very little chance of unknowingly infringing the laws of his nature; if he is sick, the means are in his reach to procure relief; if he suffers from fever, he knows that it is caused by bad drainage, or some other careless oversight—maybe insufficient ventilation and stifled atmosphere; if he be a drunkard, the blame is upon himself, even though he be led into it by others, for he has perfect freedom of his will in such a case, and must be well aware from the experience gained by others, that his sin will be visited on himself, This aptly illustrates the statement put forth in the conditions in reference to this essay, that it is man’s duty to constantly exercise his intellectual faculties, and the consequent sin of not doing so can be seen accurately illustrated every day (we are sorry to say) in the streets of our city, by noticing the pernicious effects of so vile a practice on the poor inebriated fools who so frequently parade our streets in a sort of zigzag march, lowering themselves below the four-footed brutes, and making themselves despised by their fellow-creatures. If they studied the truths of Physiology and health, and spent their money on literature, or any other kind of useful

knowledge, instead of buying the poisonous "nobbler," that their depraved tastes so eagerly long for, they might become model men and women and a benefit to mankind.

Let us now turn our attention to History, the record of man's existence, and see what lessons of truth we can glean from its vast fields. But first, let us ask ourselves the question, How should History be read? This question is of great moment, and it would be a good thing if every student put it to his careful deliberation before he commences so grave and important a study. A great many read a certain history through, or perhaps learn it off by heart, satisfied, when they have gone so far, that they know enough. But then the question naturally arises, Do they know enough, or, in, fact, do they know anything? They have studied work of a certain writer, and know what he has told them, it is true; but do they know anything of the author? his veracity? his partisanship? or his general character? and lastly, do they know whether his statements harmonize with the statements of others? It must be obvious to them that if the latter be not the case, his work, by itself, is no criterion to judge by, even though it be true, unknown to him. The only way, then, to properly study history, is by reading the works of different writers, holding different shades of opinion, if possible, and noting any discrepancies that may occur between them, and finding out by these means, as far as possible, which works are reliable histories, and which writers are to be trusted for their statements. What example, then, has history given to mankind of the operations and benefits of truth? It has shown him in the examples of the ages, the disadvantages of bad draining, bad ventilation, bad government, indolence, bad practices generally, and has set him the task of using his intellectual faculties for the purpose of understanding and bettering his condition. It has shown him that the way to live happily is not by worshipping shrines, and paying money to priests, or by wandering about in the garb of a pilgrim to offer up thanksgivings for what he has never received, but by carefully attending to the wants of life—seeing that the drainage is good, to prevent disease—bathing regularly, to preserve a healthy skin—ventilating the house, to keep the air within pure—being clean in his person, and being generally attentive to the little necessities that occasionally crop up; and by these means, and these means only, tend to make life enjoyable, as Nature has destined it should be. If we examine the social condition of Europe at the time of the Reformation, we shall see the state of degradation to which humanity was lowered. The following quotations will serve to show this to the reader. "The surface of the Continent (of Europe) was, for the most part, covered with pathless forests. In the lowlands, and along the river-courses were fens, sometimes hundreds of miles in extent, exhaling their pestiferous miasms, and spreading ague far and wide. In Paris and London the houses were of wood, daubed with clay, and thatched with straw or reeds. They had no windows, very few had wooden floors. There were no chimneys; the smoke of the ill-fed, cheerless fire, escaped through a hole in the roof. No attempt was made at draining, but the putrefying garbage and rubbish were simply thrown out of the door. Men, women, and children, slept in the same apartment; not unfrequently domestic animals were their companions; in such a confusion of the family it was impossible that modesty or morality could be maintained. Personal cleanliness was unknown; great officers of state swarmed with vermin. The streets had no sewers; they were without pavement or lamps. The ague-stricken peasant with no help except shrine-cure! How was it possible that the population could increase? Shall we, then, wonder that in the famine of 1030 human flesh was cooked and sold; or that, in that of 1258, fifteen thousand persons died of hunger in England? Shall we wonder that in some of the invasions of the plague the living could hardly bury the dead?" Such is the picture of the condition of Europe at the period mentioned, as described by Professor Draper. But how did society throw off those fetters which had so bound it down? It came about by the

inevitable law of development. Men had sunken into these filthy habits, the result of indolence; but the necessary reaction ensued. They saw death and misery besetting them on all sides. What were they to do? They had the choice whether they should remain in this abominable state, or take steps to free themselves of it. But they had only one way of freeing themselves. They must study Nature, and assist her laws; overcome indolence; put their faith in their own capabilities instead of in shrine-cures and other inventions of human cunning; exert themselves to their utmost to better their position, and never cease working for such a good and beneficial object. It is only by these means, generally the result of necessity, that man has uplifted himself to the lofty position which he now occupies and it is only by continuing to do so, that he will better his condition in the future. These troublous episodes in the history of mankind although so destructive in their time, are necessary for his welfare; they are the most useful lessons of History, for it is by example that we prosper, or, in other words, it is only by a *knowledge* of truth that mankind can benefit each other.

History, so called, gives an account of mankind in the collective sense; Biography gives an account of each man individually. Let us now turn our attention to the latter, and see what lessons of truth await us there, remembering that Biography requires the same careful study that History does. In all countries, and in all ages, we find lovers of mankind, eager to benefit their suffering brethren, and teaching such truths as their knowledge made them aware of. It is these that we shall notice, for two reasons; firstly, they are more to the point for our subject; and secondly, the short space at our disposal prevents our noticing more. These saviours of mankind may be traced back to the remotest regions of antiquity. Going far before the time at which our own era begins, and, in fact, in almost prehistoric times, we take the reader back to about the year 628 B.C. This is the period generally assigned to the birth of Buddha. We commence with him because he is the first, in chronological order, of the great moral leaders of mankind of whom we have any particular knowledge. Buddha was born in India, of royal parents (so say the accounts). His mother died not long after his birth, and he took to spending his life in thoughtful reverie, his mind being chiefly occupied with thoughts upon life and death. Often would he stroll alone in the forests, thinking of the misery and wickedness of mankind, and wondering how he could help to better his fellow creatures. He went about preaching good morals, and spurring his hearers up to benevolent actions. He is said to have been very handsome, and of extensive wisdom; be this as it may, his teachings, written by his disciples (he never having written anything himself), show with what good thoughts he was inspired. We shall give a few examples of his utterances, though they must not be considered in any way complete; like every other good man he had his failings, but "taking him all in all" he was a worthy example for man to follow. He says, when asked by Alvaka (the devil), "of savoury things which is indeed the most savoury?" "Truth is indeed the most savoury of all savoury things." Again, he says, "Let the wise man guard his thoughts, they are difficult to perceive, very artful, and they rush wherever they list; thoughts well guarded bring happiness." "Let no man think lightly of evil." "Let us live happily then, not hating those that hate us ... free from greed among the greedy ... and though we call nothing our own." "Not to commit any sin; to do good, and to purify one's mind, that is the teaching of the Awakened" Buddha lived to see his doctrines preached throughout India, and died in the eightieth year of his age. His followers number at the present time upwards of four hundred million souls: a significant fact, showing how the truth can be spread by perseverance and devotion to its cause. Ascending the ladder of time we come next to Zoroaster. We cannot here say much of him. We shall merely remark that he was born about 513 years B.C., that he lived about 76 years, and that

the doctrines which he taught were widely spread throughout Persia. Very little is known of him, as his history (like that of Pythagoras) is so enveloped in fable and mystery. In his Zend-Avesa, or Bible, he says, Hear with your ears what is best, perceive with your mind what is pure, so that every man may choose his tenets." "Let us then be of those who further this world. . . . Oh! bliss, whose history is almost lost in fable, the next great thinker we come to is Confucius. He was born 550 years B.C. He is the leading light amongst the Chinese. He was very fond of learning, and showed great veneration to the aged; he also showed great respect for the laws of his country. "His life was given to teaching a few great truths, obedience to which would bring happiness to every man." Some of his sayings are very telling. "To see what is right, and not to do it, is the want of courage," and "Have no depraved thoughts," are two of his sayings. Pope says:—

"Superior and alone Confucius stood,
Who taught that noble science—be good."

Socrates, born 469 B.C., was a great pioneer of truth. He taught that man should use his judgment in all things; and he was the first Greek philosopher on record who taught the value of scepticism. He talked with the youth of Greece upon all subjects, questioning them in a style not unlike the cross-questioning of the present day. "He talked with everyone, no matter how low in life they were nor how apparently ignorant; his theory being that every man knew *something* better than he did." He heretically taught that there was but one God, and that man was guided by an inward monitor (no doubt alluding to Conscience); but the people of his day did not share that opinion, but said that he was possessed of a devil. He was therefore condemned to death, and drank the fatal cup of hemlock, the usual mode of death in those days. Thus through Ignorance of the Truth, and its offshoot, Bigotry, the world lost one of its greatest thinkers and philosophers. Plato, the disciple of Socrates, lived to preach his doctrines, and helped greatly to benefit his fellow creatures. We now come to one, of whom the reader of this essay has, no doubt, heard. We refer to Jesus Christ. This good man and true philanthropist (for a man he undoubtedly was, or his example would have been useless for man to try and imitate), whose history will be found in almost every Christian library, has done a great deal to alleviate the sufferings of mankind, and to teach them the doctrine of brotherly love; and, although respect for the truth prevents us from saying that we agree with many as to his Divine origin, we cannot but look upon him as one of those great and good minds, whose sympathies have ever been with their suffering fellow-creatures and who have always been averse to seeing the rich and powerful tramping down the weak. His teachings may be summed up in his two great moral precepts—"Do unto others as you would have that they should do unto you," and "Love one another." If men obey this there will be very little selfish feeling between them, and they will learn to respect the rights of others. In reference to our denying the Divinity of Jesus, we may mention that Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Confucians, &c., might all put in a similar claim, and, of course, would do so, but we cannot grant it to them all, and if all but one be untrue, who is to say which is the true one? Coming to later times we meet with such men as Mahomet, King Alfred the Great, that earnest-hearted reformer, Martin Luther, who set the noble example of free thought to his followers—an example which few of them have imitated, and many other good souls; these we must, however pass over. In conclusion we must say, that it is by studying the lives of those that have lived before us, that man can best benefit himself and others; and that those whose names we have mentioned should all be classed in the same category, namely, saviours of mankind;— when we speak of saviours, we mean those who have endeavoured to enlighten and benefit mankind. But whilst noticing

their good qualities we must not overlook their faults, nor place blind faith in every story that human cunning, or human credulity, has affixed to their names.

By the discoveries in steam, and its applications to navigation and other useful arts, man has been enabled to discover many great truths of Nature; but long before the uses of steam were discovered he has learned by navigation many valuable facts. He has proved that the earth is round; and also, that it is entirely suspended in space, and not supported on the backs of elephants or tortoises, or floating on water, as many supposed. But Navigation has done more for him than this—it has opened up to him two great continents hitherto unknown and not anticipated, which are now the resorts of millions from the older and over-populated countries of Europe. Thanks to the enterprise of Columbus, Captain Cook, and other energetic men, the continents of America and Australia are no longer unknown, but are rapidly increasing in population; and the former already contains cities which are the envy of the world; the latter is making rapid strides, and its cities bid fair to become some of the greatest in the world. These grand results would never have been brought about had not those mighty minds stepped forward and proclaimed to a bigoted world their heartfelt convictions and total disagreement with the beliefs of the day. Many good men have suffered both persecution and torment that the truth might be found and made known; and we of the present day live to enjoy the fruits of their ardour and perseverance. Surely we should not be ungrateful, and forget the good done to us in the past. We should not be satisfied with the possession of truths that have been made known to us, but should strive with all our energies, to imitate the good example set us, and use our best endeavours to search for truth far and wide, not keeping it selfishly to ourselves, as the miser does his gold, letting it lay by, of no use to anyone, when we have obtained possession of it, but making it known to all; let this be our motto:

Let Truth flash like the lightning, on, on, from shore to shore;
Let all assist its progress, till time shall be no more.

We can scarcely mention a discovery of any importance whatever, that has not turned of advantage to man. Each new invention or discovery leads to another; the discoveries of electricity led to the electric telegraph; the electric telegraph led to the telephone, and evolved from this we have had the phonograph, microphone, and other great triumphs, the bare supposition of which, a few years back, would have been looked upon as the mental wanderings of a maniac, or at least, as "castles building in the air." Man has far more opportunities of aiding in the advancement of truth at the present time than he has ever had before. With the aid of the printing press and the newspapers, ideas can be exchanged between one party and another, and he who searches for the truth may find it by these means in many things; but as we have before remarked, he must not think himself infallible, but must use extreme care in drawing his conclusions; above all, he must avoid that great enemy to truth—Prejudice; let him overcome this, and he need not fear the results. Those modern outgrowths of civilization and experience, namely; Business, Commerce, Politics, and Law, are always capable of improvement and extension. We find them now, not applied to the advantages of one party and the disadvantages of another, to anything like the extent that they formerly were; for man is gradually, though surely, recognising the rights of others besides himself. And we hope, and believe, a time will come when prejudice shall be almost forgotten, and man's mind shall be free to wander through the broad paths of knowledge and enlightenment.

Reviewing what we have said, we note, that a correct knowledge of truth, as we have endeavoured to show, is absolutely necessary to man's welfare; we have shown the evil results of his

not exercising his intellectual faculties, by reference to his state during the Middle Ages. We have shown that it is necessary he should observe, carefully taking note of the smallest particulars, enquiring far and wide amongst parties of every opinion, either verbally, or by the use of books and papers; and that when he does get the information, he should carefully consider in his mind what value it has, and whether he cannot, if it be imperfect, supplant it by something better, or, at least, endeavour to improve it, that the truth may be more certain, and more reliable for future ages to build their knowledge upon.

If, as we believe, we have given a reasonably fair exposition of our text, our labours will not be in vain. We have honestly stated what we believe to be the truth, hoping earnestly that others may follow in our footsteps, finishing that which we may not have completed, and correcting any errors of our judgment by careful and impartial investigation, and thorough enquiry into the Truth.

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