

CHAPTER V.

ON DEFINITION.

ALTHOUGH the importance of definition be generally acknowledged, one important thing concerning it appears to be forgotten, namely, its own definition. The definitions given by some of the most celebrated men differ essentially in their *character*. Some are statements of the components of the thing defined; some are statements of the properties that the thing *has*; some are statements of *events* relating to the thing defined; some are *histories* of the thing, &c. It is evident, that until the *character* of a definition be determined, much of the utility arising from the practice of defining must be lost.

As every portion of recorded or expressed knowledge necessarily implies three things, it is of importance to determine which of these three is the subject of the definition. There is first the *thing in nature* (ens). (This is what metaphysicians and theologians attempt to define.) 2d, The *concept* of that thing. (This is what the man of science attempts to define.) 3d, The *expression* of the thing,

or of its concept, in a word or symbol. (This is what the lexicographer attempts to define).

As there exists no book of intellectual philosophy of sufficient authority to merit or to obtain general reception, every writer is unfortunately under the necessity of determining for himself, not only what should be contained in a definition, but what the character of a definition ought to be.

The discussions and controversies so prevalent in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, seem to have arisen very much from men attempting to determine or to define the character of the things *in nature*. To take the most common entity as an example—*matter*: what matter is in itself, or in external nature, man knows not. No man can determine, nor even conceive, nor give an idea of what the essence of matter is—that is, what matter is in itself. But when we speak of our conception of matter, we are not altogether on such uncertain ground. When we say that matter is that which *possesses* properties appreciable by the senses, we no longer speculate on its essence, but state exactly *what* we know of it by means of those things by which we *do* know it.

When, on the contrary, we define an equilateral triangle as a *figure* bounded by three equal straight lines, we predicate not what the triangle *has*, but what it *is*. A figure is a *space* bounded. And what is *space*? Here we may stop, if space be considered the most simple form of the concept; or, if *distance* and *direction* be considered to constitute space, we

fall back on distance and direction. But we can go no farther; for distance and direction are absolutely incapable of any thing approaching to analysis. Consequently, the comprehension of what is meant by distance and direction (or space) must be taken for granted.

It is quite evident that the practice of defining cannot be of indefinite extent; for, if a definition be given, and it be required to define each term in that definition, and, again, each term in those new definitions, language, which is limited, would be exhausted.

There must, therefore, be a certain number of concepts taken for granted, a certain number of primaries from which to start; for no two beings can hold communication with each other unless they have the mutual conception of a certain number of terms (or things signified by terms) with which to commence their communication. These primaries, or simples, must themselves be incapable of true definition; but they will be found, or ought to be found, to consist of concepts common to all mankind.

The definition of a simple concept, then, is not a definition, but the announcement of some commonly known truth or fact, which shall call up in the mind of another person the concept to which we wish to refer. For instance, all men have the concept of *time*; but no man can define time otherwise than by stating some event belonging to it, which event being already known, the person addressed shall understand that the simple concept *time* is meant.

But there is another class of concepts which are capable of definition in a different manner. Simple concepts are found in certain combinations, or juxtapositions, and the same combination is of so frequent recurrence, that, instead of employing two or more names to express it, we employ only one,—as *duration*, a single word or symbol, which implies two distinct concepts, namely, *time* and *quantity*. The definition in this case, therefore, consists in expressing all the simple concepts of which the complex one is composed, with their relations. Again, *motion*, a single word; but it implies three concepts—the *subject*, *space*, and *change*.

Definition is, then, the decomposition of a complex into its substantive elements. It is the analysis of a concept; and as into it should not be introduced events or history, it might be termed, not the natural history nor the physics of an idea, but its chemistry. And in chemistry we have something very analogous, *e. g.*, *rust*, one word. But in the proper understanding of rust, there is the conception of *iron* and of *oxygen*; and to state these two with their relation, would be to define rust in a chemical sense.

We have made these preliminary observations for the purpose of pointing out the fact, that *the fundamental concept* of an abstract science is a simple concept incapable of definition. *Identity*, *unity*, *quantity*, *distance*, *direction*, *force*, and *equity*, are all incapable of definition. The metaphysicians may attempt to define them, as they may attempt to

demonstrate an axiom ; but the attempt is a mere fruitless effort to go beyond the limits of our nature. A simple concept is incapable of division ; and all the primary substantives treated of by the abstract sciences are simple. At the same time, it is worthy of remark that *all* men appear to have exactly the same simple concepts, and difference of opinion seldom or never arises concerning the abstract form of the concept, but only concerning some particular case of it. The *sentiments* appear to follow the same law,—all men have the same sentiments, but they differ entirely about the particular cases. For instance, all men appear to have the sentiment of right and wrong ; yet they differ entirely as to what *particular acts* are right or wrong ; and so with *worship* and *equity*, &c.

If definition be confined to the analysis of a concept, we see at once that the verbs *to have*, *to do*, and *to suffer*, should find no place in a definition, and that the only verb must be the substantive verb *to be*. But as the verb *to be* is an auxiliary as well as a substantive verb, a little care is requisite to distinguish the cases in which it is used in the one sense or the other. [This ambiguity of the substantive verb is productive of innumerable ambiguities, that are never detected, on account of the apparent simplicity of the language ; and we may elsewhere take occasion to advert to the theory of the verbs as employed in logic.]

Definition, then, according to our view, can only be applied legitimately to composite concepts ; and

a definition is the statement of the concepts that compose the complex one, with their relations.

Definitions may be real or spurious, true or false, adequate, inadequate, or redundant. A real definition is one that is really a definition with regard to form, whether correct or false in its matter.

A false definition is one that contains an erroneous proposition, whether the form be that of a real definition or not. A great proportion of the definitions usually given are *spurious*—that is, not definitions at all, although their proposition may be correct.

The definitions of the mathematical sciences, for the most part, follow the rule we have given; but the definitions of political economy are many of them spurious. Many political economists attempt to define *value* (a simple concept), and every attempt is only productive of a spurious definition. The other substantives of political economy are only *forms of value*,—*e. g.*, *wealth, capital, rent, wages, profits, price*, are only forms of value, in the same sense as figures are forms of *space*, or x , $-x$, \sqrt{x} , &c., are forms of *quantity*. No real definition of *value* is possible, any more than a definition of quantity is possible. *Wealth, capital, &c.*, ought to be defined *in value*. “What kind of value is meant by capital, wealth, rent?” The answer to this question gives the definition of the *form*; but the primary concept *value* is simple, and cannot be defined. It may be limited, however, to *exchangeable value*; but this is only a *form*, and the fundamental concept remains as far as ever from definition. What is it to which

the adjective *exchangeable* is annexed? No answer can be given except "*value*." Value, like so many other nouns, is only a *cause*, and a cause cannot be defined. Man desires an object; he then conceives a *cause* (residing in the object) that produces his desire; this cause he calls *value*. Force, heat, light, &c., are in the same category, and no definition of them is possible. Force = cause of motion, &c.; heat = cause of combustion, &c.; light = cause of visibility. None of these are definitions, but only determinations of *language*.

[For some remarks on the definitions of the terms used in political economy, see Whately's *Logic*, seventh edition, p. 402. "1. *Value*. As value is the only relation with which political economy is conversant, we might expect all economists to be agreed as to its meaning. There is no subject on which they are less agreed. The popular, and far the most convenient use of the word, is to signify the capacity of being given and received in exchange. So defined, it expresses a relation."—(P. 403.) This definition applies equally well to the thrust of a sword, which has "the capacity of being given and received in exchange. So defined, it expresses a relation." Yet we should scarcely call the thrust of a sword an article of *value*,—at all events, to the recipient. Again, a man may have a *valuable* wife; yet it can scarcely be said that the capacity of *exchanging* the lady is the measure of her valuable qualities, although even that view might not be altogether without its supporters, were the exchange lawful.

If value be fixed upon as the fundamental substantive of political economy, it might be *limited* to "such value as can be exchanged for desired objects;" but no *definition* of value can result in any thing else than confusion. The other terms, however, can be defined *in value*, and their definitions may be real, provided value be taken for granted. The definition of *labour* ought to follow the limitation of value, and labour might be limited to such labour as was employed to produce articles of exchange.

The fundamental concept of politics is EQUITY or JUSTICE, and the definitions of the science must be made in that concept. Of course, as in the other sciences, there is the abstract form, the particular case (concrete form), the noun, adjective, the verb, and the adverb; but these are only grammatical variations, and the concept remains the same. We must not suppose that a difference of the *word* makes a difference in the meaning. For instance, "a square *ought* to be constructed in such and such a manner;" "the *correct* method of constructing a square is so and so." Here the same idea is expressed by the verb *ought* in the former case, and by the adjective *correct* in the latter. The different parts of speech are required to facilitate communication; but the very same concept may be present, although the form of expression might not suggest even an analogy. The only *peculiar* term in the science of politics is the term *equity*, and its opposite, *injustice*, as in logic the only peculiar term is identity, and its opposite, non-identity. Our definitions, therefore, must be made

to contain no peculiar concept except equity (or its opposite); and as equity is a simple concept, it is one of those that are common to man as man. If any man should not happen to possess it, he is not a moral being, and no instruction whatever can give him the slightest conception of what it is. At the same time, indefinite diversity of opinion may (from ignorance) exist as to the *particular cases* in which equity should be predicated; but the concept, in its abstract form, is too generally understood to require substantiating, nor would any proof of its existence be *possible*. *Duty* and *conscience*, &c., have been called in question as to whether they had any existence or not. The whole discussion is perfectly unnecessary, inasmuch as no primary whatever, either in the physical, the mathematical, or the moral sciences, is *ever* proven to exist. Forms and relations, and not existence, are the exclusive objects of science; and it should also be remembered that, so far as the abstract sciences are concerned, the truths are just as necessary, whether there be any *real* objects to signify the abstract relations or not. It makes no difference to abstract logic whether there are, or are not, any *real equivalents*,—the relations are the same. And so with arithmetic; it makes no difference whether there are, or are not, any real objects to number,—the relations remain the same. Provided the mind can *conceive* the first primary substantive, the whole question is settled, so far as the science is abstract. And, in the matter of equity, the relations are dependent on the necessary form of

thought common to mankind; and if the mind can conceive equity, the abstract science must be just as necessary, whether man be, or be not, a moral being. At the same time, perhaps the very power of conceiving equity is the best argument that man is a moral being, and has duties to fulfil; and those who would obliterate *duty*, for the purpose of substituting *benefit*, might do well to examine their own minds more narrowly, and inquire at the elementary sentiments of our nature, whether there are not acts which ought *not* to be done, and which we know ought *not* to be done, even though we have no knowledge of the consequences that would follow.* The first man who committed *murder*, and the first man

* "If man be not a moral agent, and if his sphere in this respect do not immeasurably transcend that of the sentient orders around him, how comes he to talk as if he were? If, in regard to a moral system, he be only a brute of finer form, born of the earth, and returning to it, whence is it that, in respect of virtue and vice, of good and evil, the dialect of heaven rolls over his lips? When was it, and how, that he stole the vocabulary of the skies? Human responsibility, then, using the term in its highest sense, is not an opinion to be proved, but a principal and obvious fact in the natural history of man. The consciousness of responsibility attaches to all men; and the only seeming exceptions (for they are not really such) are of two kinds, namely,—that of individuals or races long brutalised by sensuality and ferocity; and that of a handful of sophists, who have talked themselves and one another out of common sense, until they no longer know where to find within their bosoms any genuine sentiments."—(*Isaac Taylor*.)—"La liberté n'est pas une simple croyance, comme le veut Kant, *c'est un fait*, un fait égal en certitude à tout ce qu'il y a de plus certain; on peut la nier en théorie, on la reconnaît nécessairement en pratique; tous les sentiments de l'homme la supposent, tous ses actes l'expliquent. Il croit à la liberté quand il approuve, blâme, estime, méprise, admire; il y croit encore quand il conseille, invite, menace, dirige."—(*Cousin*.)

who committed *suicide*, could have no *inductive* means of determining the character of the actions, yet it will scarcely be maintained, we should imagine, that those acts were *à priori* as indifferent as an experiment in physical science. And if not, then must the position be abandoned that *the whole* of politics is inductive. The *whole* of politics (taking the term generally) is *not* inductive. The most essential part of the science is *à priori*, and relates to the *constitution* of the State, and to the definite settlement of the *principles* on which a government must be formed to be a just government.

It is a pity that the two branches of political science should ever have been placed in opposition. They do not infringe each other's domain, neither can the one dispense with the other. Pure politics teaches what ought *not* to be done. Political economy teaches what may be done beneficially within the limits that remain. Pure politics draws a definite boundary, and says, "Beyond this boundary the ruler is not competent to act, without becoming an oppressor or a defrauder." Neither can the majority, nor the deliberative assembly, nor any other society whatever, be one single shade more competent than the ruler. *Man* is not competent to overstep the boundary without acting in opposition to those principles of axiomatic equity that the Creator has given to the race, to guide them in their actions towards each other. It is true that the boundary *has* been universally overstepped by rulers, but the physical sciences present the same kind of departure

from the correct rule. A few centuries since, men believed all kinds of propositions relating to matter, just as they now believe all kinds of propositions relating to men. Astrology and alchymy were the forerunners of astronomy and chemistry. But what, after all, were astrology and alchymy? Suites of superstitious propositions *assumed without evidence*, and turned to the profit of the designing. And what was the divine right of kings, or the right of a slaveholder to a negro, or the right to make men conform to a particular creed, or the right to gift the nation's land, or the right to conquer a country, and give the land to the followers of the conqueror? Nothing but suites of superstitious propositions assumed without evidence, and turned to the profit of the designing, who backed their superstitious credence by the licentious arm of power.

The superstitions of the physical sciences are fast dying away in Europe, but the political superstitions yet remain; and many a credence, with regard to politics, has yet to be abandoned, and many a privilege has yet to be overthrown, on the one simple principle, that the positive proposition is not to be credited until accompanied by evidence. And if not to be credited, how much less to be acted on?