

CHAPTER VI.

ON THE AXIOM.

AN axiom is a self-evident truth ; that is, it is a proposition which, when clearly comprehended by the human mind, is at once admitted to be necessarily and universally true. It is, in fact, nothing more than the expression in language of the ultimate and abstract mode of human thought, out of which the concrete realities have been dropped, so as to leave only the form of cognition. If I say, for instance, that 25 francs are equal to 12 Rhenish florins, *because* each sum is equal to £1 sterling, and I then drop out the francs, florins, and pound, and reflect on the form of the proposition, I shall find that I have been affirming that things equal to the same are equal to each other, which is the *abstract* statement of the same proposition, generalised or universalised. No axiom ever relates to any concrete reality, except as that reality may be expressed in a *general* description. The axiom announces an abstract relation, which we cannot conceive to be other than it is. Of the two terms (or substantives connected by a copula), the one is usually subject to

direct or immediate appreciation ; the other is only arrived at through the axiom ; and thus the scheme of abstract thought, or rather the abstract form of knowledge, existing universally the same in all human minds, becomes capable of application to, or of union with, the infinite variety of concrete reality. For instance, in the axiom, "every change must have a cause," the substantives are change and cause. The former is subjected to immediate and direct appreciation ; that is, we can observe and measure a change. *Cause*, on the contrary, is utterly beyond all means of direct apprehension, and we are only conscious of causes through the intuitive axiom of the reason that every change must have a cause. Again, *force* is invisible, intangible, and incapable of direct appreciation ; and we arrive at it only through the axiom that "every *motion* has a force," where motion is capable of observation and measurement.

A very large portion of human language consists of abstract terms, to which there is no real correlative. Were it not for the existence of axioms there would be no possibility of linking these abstract terms (which represent abstract conceptions of the mind) with the realities and real events of the actual universe. The axiom is the bridge that connects the region of abstraction with the region of reality. The use or function of the axiom is, in the scheme of human knowledge, only equalled by the function of the abstraction. As in mechanics we have the body (the substantive) and the force (the operating agent), so in knowledge have we the abstraction (the

substantive) and the axiom (the operating agent). Were there no *force*, we necessarily conceive that every portion of matter would cease to move, and that all human knowledge would be confined to the knowledge of objects and of their quiescent conditions. There would be no motion, no function, of the created realities. And so in knowledge. Were there no *axiom*, knowledge would at once cease to be rational (that is, operational or dynamic), and would immediately become contemplational,—that is, merely static and substantial.

Although the axiom may be called a mere truism, and is a mere truism—(were it *not* so, it could not be an axiom)—it is the necessary condition, without which rational knowledge would be impossible. The necessity of its explicit statement is a very different matter from the necessity of its subjective existence. The statement, in the mathematical sciences, at all events, is perhaps of no vital importance; but if it did not exist in the human mind (subjectively) no effort of man could ever originate one item of mathematical science. The abstractions of mathematics are only made to function (that is, to produce propositions), by the existence and application of the axiom. Obliterate the axiom and the abstraction, and you leave knowledge only a nomenclature of the physical objects that are appreciable by sense, and of the psychological phenomena of which we are immediately conscious.

The same holds true with political science in its ethical form. If there were no axioms necessary and

universal, there could be no ethics. There might be a summation of pleasures and pains, of advantages and disadvantages ; but there could not by any possibility be a doctrine of duties, or a doctrine of rights. Both rights and duties are intuitional abstractions, the conception of which, as applicable to humanity, constitutes man a moral agent. If man were merely involved in an empirical and inductive scheme of political economy, he would not be a moral agent,—he would only be an *instinctive* agent,—he would only be an animal of a higher grade, in some things more knowing and in some things more foolish, than the other animals that tenant the globe,—he would be first cousin to the ape and second cousin to the monkey. It is the conception of *duty*, as distinguished from mere instinctive desire, that makes the unfathomable gulf of separation between man and the other classes of sensitive creatures. Instinct can perform its office without intellect, and can produce, objectively, results of surpassing beauty without the reasons of the same being subjectively present to the intelligence of the operator. But *duty* can never be performed by instinct—the very conception of duty involving also the intelligent conception of reasons for acting in one mode rather than another. Duty is only possible for a being who is, so far, placed upon the verge of freedom, and allowed consciously to select a good action, not because he is irresistibly impelled to perform the same, but because, weighing and considering it, he beholds it to be right. All our conceptions of justice, and all our administrations

of justice, proceed on this principle of conscious deliberation, investigation, and selection,—a process which indicates in man a higher nature than has been given to the animals.

At this conclusion we must therefore arrive,—either that there are axioms of duty capable of being stated as indisputable truths, and capable of being put in systematic operation, or, if there be no such axioms, then is there no duty whatever (unless such could be derived from revelation), and all morals would be mere superstition, and all laws which restrained, controlled, or punished men, only superfluous infliction.

If, however, there are axioms of justice from which a political system can be derived, and if such a system is capable of actual realization, then *that* system is the great requirement of the world, for until it be carried into practice, confusion, disorder, pauperism, and social derangement must necessarily prevail. The social world can no more produce good without being constructed on the principles of truth, than the field of labour would produce its burthen of yellow grain were we to sow a heterogeneous mixture of seeds—thistles, briars, and weeds, mingled only with a few particles of the cereal we desired. In the axioms of justice may be hid a new arrangement of the social world, prolific of human benefit to an extent which would now appear only as a fabulous dream, as the fond imagining of fancy roving untrammelled by experience of the present, and building its future with the deceptive materials of delusive hope. It may be

so, yet even now the dawn of a better, freer, more peaceful, and more prosperous world may almost be seen faintly gilding the horizon, and heralding to the eye of expectation the daybreak of a golden age, in which the fruits of righteousness shall be peace, and the effects of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever.