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978-1-108-00123-6 - Man and his Dwelling Place: An Essay towards the Interpretation of Nature

James Hinton

Excerpt

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MAN AND HIS DWELLING PLACE.

INTRODUCTION.

He who has seen obscurities which appeared impenetrable in physical and mathematical science suddenly dispelled, and the most barren and unpromising fields of inquiry converted, as if by inspiration, into rich and inexhaustible springs of knowledge and power on a simple change of our point of view, or by merely bringing to bear upon them some principle which it never occurred before to try, will surely be the very last to acquiesce in any dispiriting prospects of either the present or future destinies of mankind.

SIR J. HERSCHEL: *Disc. on Nat. Philosophy.*

IT has been well observed that the child and the savage invent an explanation of every thing they do not understand, whilst the man whose powers are matured and disciplined investigates. He has learnt to be patient, and to wait for grounds of knowledge before he supposes himself to know. Thus progress is made. From investigation comes discovery. Our partial and incompetent reason, brought into contact with the great facts of nature, becomes itself enlarged. For the natural suppositions by which man explains the unknown are not equal to the scope of things. They express himself, his ignorance, his limited relations.

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INTRODUCTION.

All advance in knowledge is a deliverance of man from himself. Slowly and painfully he learns that he is not the measure of truth, that the fact may be very different from the appearance to him. The lesson is hard, but the reward is great. So he escapes from illusion and error, from ignorance and failure. Directing his thoughts and energies no more according to his own impressions, but according to the truth of things, he finds himself in possession of an unimaginable power alike of understanding and of acting. To a truly marvellous extent he is the lord of nature.

But the conditions of this lordship are inexorable. They are the surrender of prepossessions, the abandonment of assumptions, the confession of ignorance: the open eye and humble heart. Hence in all passing from error to truth we learn something respecting ourselves, as well as respecting the object of our study. Simultaneously with our better knowledge we recognise the reason of our ignorance, and perceive what defect on our part has caused us to think wrongly.

Either the world is such as it appears to us, or it is not. If it be not, there must be some condition affecting ourselves which modifies the impression that we receive from it. And this condition must be operative on all mankind: it must relate to man as a whole rather than to individual men.

So far as we could judge without reference to experience, either of these cases might be supposed.

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There is perhaps no sufficient reason, *a priori*, why we should not imagine that the appearance might correspond with the fact of things; and, on the other hand, we know that circumstances which affect ourselves do continually modify our perception of objects, so that their appearance differs more or less considerably from that which they truly are. And in some cases this difference of the appearance from the fact is very great. Perhaps nothing can be more unlike the planets than the appearance they present to us; or, to make the case more striking, let us imagine our own earth viewed from one of the other planets. Can any thing be more different from this dark solid varied mass than the bright spot it would appear? The dissimilarity is extreme.

Therefore, when we approach inquiries relating to nature, and the true relations which we bear to the universe, we must be treading on unsafe ground if we assume, without investigation, one of these possible events to be true to the exclusion of the other. We cannot be sure that the world does not differ in extreme degree from its appearance. All experience combines to teach us caution. The history of human error is a history of the taking it for granted that things are as they appear.

Speaking generally, we may say that all speculation hitherto has been based upon the supposition that the appearance of the world does correspond with the fact. All systems are attempts to repre-

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sent the order of things on that natural supposition. And not only is this the case with philosophical systems, it is equally true of the ordinary and unregulated ideas which lie in every man's mind. All our conceptions are based on the implied postulate that the world is as it appears.

How far the result is satisfactory each man must judge for himself. But it should not be forgotten that another course is open. If we could recognise any element in our condition that should have the effect of causing the appearance of the world in which we are to differ from the fact, the issue of our speculative labours might at least be different from that which it is at present.

That appearances should be deceptive has an evident necessity in the nature of things. For the appearance of every object, or the way in which it primarily impresses us, depends upon our relations in respect to it.* But these relations, infinitely varied as they are, must be ascertained by the study of those objects themselves. We have not any natural or intuitive knowledge of them. Therefore as our relations to the world become more widely known to us we are constantly learning to recognise as the cause of our perceptions facts which are widely different from that which those perceptions at first suggest. Nor do we feel in doing this any embarrassment or difficulty: it is the very thing

* Apparent size, for example, depends upon our distance.

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which gives to our conceptions clearness and simplicity.

For right knowledge, it is necessary that the relations between ourselves and the objects that affect us should be clearly understood: that we should know why, the fact being as it is, the appearance must be such as it is to us. The planets appear so small because of our distance, so bright because of the laws of reflection of light: they appear to be revolving around the earth because we are being moved. Knowing these things, it is no longer strange to us to think of those specks of light as orbs kindred to our own: or of the stars so like them in respect to sense as yet vaster worlds glowing with a radiance of their own. We entirely mistake if we imagine that there is any difficulty to the human mind in recognising under any sensuous appearance a fact how unlike soever to that appearance. Nothing is more natural: to nothing is our native tendency more strong. The discovery of facts beneath appearances is the very work of the intellect, and is indeed but the recognition of our own relations to the universe. But there is always a difficulty in first taking this step: that which, when it is familiar, it seems impossible to doubt, when it was new seemed not less impossible to believe. The source of this difficulty lies in our very constitution. For we necessarily think that an appearance corresponds to the fact until by increasing knowledge we have learnt otherwise.

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The intellect demands that every appearance should be accounted for. Every impression on us must have some cause; and we necessarily suppose a cause correspondent to every such impression until some other fact be shown to which it may be more reasonably referred. This constitutes the formation of hypotheses; which are accordingly necessities of our mental being. For example, before astronomy was understood, men necessarily supposed that there existed in the heavens a small bright disc such as the moon appears. This was a *hypothesis*, which the recognition of the true moon sets aside.

Hence arises one chief difficulty in the advance of knowledge. For it is the proper work of the intellect in removing ignorance to connect our impressions or sensations with facts different from those which are most naturally suggested to us. The advance of knowledge consists in the substitution of accurate conceptions for natural ones. New truths, therefore, always come, not only with an aspect of strangeness, but in apparent opposition to received and established beliefs; sometimes in opposition to views held sacred, or fundamental to all knowledge. The hypothesis, or cause that had been supposed in ignorance in order to account for the appearance, has a hold upon the mind as if it were a fact certainly known. It is the hardest thing possible for men to remember that such hypothesis has no foundation except their own ignorance. The fact that they have been obliged

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to suppose it, and that to have denied it without showing how the impressions of which they are conscious could be otherwise produced, would have been to leave a ridiculous vacancy, and to run in the face of common sense, often overpowers all other considerations. The demand upon them to give up that which they have considered as of all things the most certain, is too much. Evidence is of little avail against that feeling. The utmost simplicity, beauty, and necessity in the new opinion often go for nothing in comparison with it.

And there is, besides, always this argument in favour of a hypothesis that has by long use become established as a truth: it is so natural; it answers so exactly to the impression or appearance which it is used to account for. This must be the case; being invented for the very purpose of accounting for our impressions, a hypothesis cannot be wanting in exact correspondence with them. In this respect it must have an advantage, and a very powerful one in relation to some of our strongest feelings, over the truth which seeks to supplant it. For that truth demands reflection and thought; it is in a certain sense opposed to our first natural conceptions, and involves an exercise of reason and a regard to the mutual bearing of various facts. Hence the struggle for the life of a hypothesis is the more prolonged. If the hypothesis be assumed, everything is simple, our impressions need no correcting, and the case is just as it seems. To all

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this there is nothing to be opposed but the argument that, plausible as that belief may be, investigation and a just use of our powers forbid us to rest in it. The weak part of a hypothesis is not that it does not perfectly account for our impressions, this it can hardly fail to do, but that it will not bear investigation. The existence of that which is seen in spectral illusions or in dreams would account perfectly for their occurrence, and we do indeed at first always account for them so. That is the natural hypothesis; but examination proves it impossible, and we have learnt accordingly to assign them to other causes. Which causes, it may be observed, are very far from being such as we should have thought likely.

These are in part the reasons which render the establishment of a new truth so difficult. Every such truth has to encounter a hypothesis which perfectly accounts for the appearances, makes little demand on the thoughtfulness and reason of men, and, above all, is established as a certain and unassailable truth, based on an experience which cannot deceive. It is no wonder that under these circumstances false views of nature should have struggled long with advancing knowledge. We should not complain that it has been so: that were to find fault with the very faculties and mental tendencies through which alone we have been made capable of learning.

Especially we should avoid the injustice with

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which it is too customary to treat the past. We are apt to think that the men who strove so long against opinions which are to us almost self-evident must have been less open to conviction and less willing to abide by the results of investigation than ourselves. But herein we do a twofold wrong: we cast undeserved reproach upon the dead, and inflict a deeper injury upon ourselves. Reading history so, making it feed our own self-confidence and pride, is sadly to abuse its lesson. Men do not alter: in these days they are no more willing to give up what they consider settled facts and principles than they were of old. In all ages men have been willing to apply principles that have been proved true, to do again in other forms that which has been done before; in no age willing, or likely to be willing, to do more. In the past we may read the present: we forget what those men whose errors we pity were called upon to do; we forget how much we owe them for what they did. They were called upon to set aside the very principles on which their mental life was moulded, to abandon as false convictions which seemed to carry away with them the entire basis on which a sound judgment or a steadfast faith could be sustained. And they did it. Trusting in God, the world has given up over and over again well nigh all its most assured convictions; trusting in God that the fact must be better than their thought. Is it for us to boast ourselves; are we willing to do as much again?

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The truth is that every generation of men thinks that it has at last arrived at the ultimate principles of knowledge, and that whatever mental revolutions may have been necessary before, no more will be needed thereafter. It must be so. The very fact of men honestly striving to do their best involves it. Man cannot foresee the future; his little horizon must seem to include the scope of heaven and earth. Ever, therefore, he is anxious to know more in accordance with his own ideas, but he cannot anticipate conceiving differently. Yet it might not be impossible to draw from history a lesson that should make us truly wiser, if we would remember that the thing which has been is the criterion of that which is likely to be; and that, as other ages, so we also might be called upon to admit ourselves in error in some of those opinions in respect to which we have been most sure that we are right.

The idea which is commonly entertained of nature is the best conception that men have been able to form respecting it, in the absence of definite, or at least of complete knowledge. Accordingly it corresponds precisely to their first natural impressions, which indeed it is constructed to represent as closely as possible. It is therefore conformable to all experience that the advance of knowledge should bring men into collision with this conception, and that it should exist as an obstacle to a truer interpretation of the facts. If it