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Frances Power Cobbe

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ESSAY I.

SOCIAL SCIENCE CONGRESSES, AND WOMEN'S PART IN THEM.

Reprinted from Macmillan's Magazine, December, 1861.

“CURE the world by *science!*” said an irate old gentleman to us this year in Dublin. “Don’t talk to me of your *Social Science!* Make people read their Bibles, and teach their children, and keep their houses clean, and attend to their business instead of the alehouse; but don’t talk balderdash about *Social Science!* Science indeed! *Social Science!* pshaw!”

Vain would it have been, no doubt, to try to persuade that excellent practical philanthropist that, like M. Jourdain, who had been “talking prose all his life without ever suspecting it,” so he had been similarly studying *Social Science*; and that it even takes no small share of the same to teach people all the good things he desired. Equally hopeless would it be to argue with one who should question whether the evils of pauperism, crime, and vice were more likely to be cured by chance and isolated efforts, than by the intelligent method and co-operation of

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persons devoted to the task, and studying, *as a science*, the solemn problems of human misery, and its possible relief. The late meeting in Dublin of the Association for the Promotion of Social Science may be counted so definitely a success, as to establish the right of such congresses to be ranked among the more prominent institutions of our times. We think ourselves accordingly fully justified in inviting our readers to a careful consideration of the various aspects of such meetings, and their probable bearings on our present condition and future prospects.

At the first blush, it is obvious that there are in them many points of unquestionable hopefulness and promise. We cannot engage to discuss the subject from the empyrean heights of wholly uninterested criticism. We feel, on the contrary, somewhat puzzled to conceive the mental state of the man who can do so; who witnesses without one glow of human sympathy so many persons assembled from every part of the kingdom, and even from distant countries, with the one recognised object of contributing what may lie in their power towards the common cause of "peace on earth, and good-will to man." Only in our age could such a purpose serve to collect such an assembly. *War*, indeed, has its councils, even among Caffres and Mohawks. The impenetrable mysteries of scholastic theology have called a thousand synods to determine the most recondite secrets of our great Maker's nature. Physical science, art, and literature

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have had their academies and institutions beyond numbering, in modern Europe. But it was reserved for the later half of our century to find even a name for that pursuit which directly tries to make mankind more good and happy, and fulfil, as best they may, the second great commandment in the Law. The mistakes, the failures, the displays of human folly and weakness (if such there should appear) at a congress like this, would make a lover of his kind rather inclined to grieve than to laugh, to lament any defect in a noble work rather than to glory over the weakness displayed by the workers.

On the other hand, there are some pertinent questions to be asked, and, perhaps, doubts to be entertained, respecting the existing mode of conducting these assemblies. We confess that on the face of it the idea is rather alarming of a large association of ladies and gentlemen, enjoying rights of membership on the qualification of a small subscription, and meeting together annually to read wholly independent and disjointed lucubrations, which, unless quite inadmissible in their character, the courteous secretary will hardly be willing to reject. That section of the community whose office in the social machine is that of the drag, and who unfortunately perform their functions whenever it is going *up* hill no less than down—these good persons have not failed to fasten themselves tightly on this new wheel of progress. “In every other science,” they remark, “some period of

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apprenticeship is admitted to be necessary. But Social Science would appear to be a Minerva, springing fully armed out of the head of Jupiter. People are ready-made 'sociologists' the moment they have taught a child, or sent a thief to jail, or given tea to an old woman. Nay, they need not have practically done so much as this. They may have evolved some gigantic scheme for the benefit of the universe merely, like the celebrated 'idea' of the camel, 'out of the depths of their moral consciousness,' and in the high regions of Social Science they may disport them at their own sweet will, almost as it were in vacuo. It is nearly as good as being clergymen, to be able to preach (though it be but for twenty minutes), and to know that nobody can contradict them. The audience may, indeed, applaud, but the laws of Social Science utterly forbid all sibilation." In other words, it is manifestly absurd to expect that any good can come of meetings so constituted.

We shall endeavour, if possible, to obtain a correct idea of what Social Science itself purposes to be, what are its legitimate objects and necessary limitations. Then we shall briefly describe the past history and present condition of the Association for the promotion of this science; and, lastly, offer such replies as may seem just to the more prominent objections brought against it from various quarters.

The debate, whether Morals properly form a deductive or an inductive science, has occupied some of

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the greatest minds of the world. Do we obtain the laws of social and personal duty from certain principles implanted by our Creator in our natures; or must we seek for them among the experienced results of actions upon the happiness or misery of ourselves and mankind? Are we to *deduce* from the intuitive axiomatic principles of "Love thy neighbour," and "Be perfect," the remoter propositions which are to determine our special obligations, or are we to *induce* from the largest attainable basis of experience the generalizations which we may then erect into canons of morality? On the one side (that of ethics being independent of the happiness test) we have a grand array of noble names—Plato and Zeno, Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca, Antoninus, Chrysostom, St. Bernard, Abelard, Cudworth, Jeremy Taylor, Shaftesbury, Clarke, Balguy, Hutcheson, South, Law, Fichte, and the two greatest moralists of any age—Bishop Butler and Immanuel Kant. And on the other side (that of ethics being the result of experience) we have another array, yet hardly of such names as on the former roll—Epicurus, Aristippus, Democritus, Machiavelli, Pomponatius, Gassendi, Sharrock, Cumberland, Locke, Grotius, Puffendorf, Paley, Bentham, and the one great living champion, John Stuart Mill. Again, on the one hand, different theories have been propounded respecting the origin, nature, and limits of the Intuitive or Innate Ideas, or Moral Sense of right and wrong. On the other hand, the

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nature of the happiness test, and the persons who are to enjoy the same, are most variously stated. It may be either the *εὐθυμία*, the intrinsic happiness of the *mens conscia recti*, to be found in virtue itself, which we are (according to Democritus, Cumberland, and More) to note and follow; or it may be the *ἡδονή*, the mere "pleasure" of Aristippus; or the *εὐδαιμονία*, the general "felicity," present or future, of Epicurus or Paley. And, again, we may apply ourselves to the discovery of what will give *us*, individually, such pleasure or happiness here or hereafter; or we may merge our own interests in that of the mass of mankind, and inquire only what will produce "the greatest happiness of the greatest number." This last doctrine (so different from the selfish system of Paley, and illustrated with such power by Bentham and Mill) stands at this moment as the sole surviving representation of the inductive school of morals. Its lesson is even ostentatiously lucid—"Obtain from statistics the largest possible basis of facts, the most extensive accumulation of results of actions on the happiness of the community, and then induce therefrom the laws which, when so obtained, must be accounted to possess the sanctity of moral obligations."

We have been thus explicit in stating the great ethical problem, because we believe that a misapprehension exists as to the relation of Social Science to this controversy. It is supposed that all researches

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into the conditions of public welfare necessarily imply that we consider the results so obtained as ultimate principles of morals, beyond which there is no higher sanction of duty. Thus those to whom the names of Plato, Butler, and Kant, convey an impression not to be shared by Democritus, Paley, and Bentham, are unjustly prejudiced against a science which, in truth, involves no such concession. "What other view, then, can we hold?" Why, simply this—

The nature of all exact science is to teach us *abstract* universal principles. It cannot possibly descend below these to practical applications. By geometry I learn that a triangle is equal to half a rectangle under the same base and altitude, but no geometry can teach me whether one of my fields be a triangle with equal base and altitude with the adjoining rectangle. To know this I must see and measure them, and then geometry will tell me that the one contains half as many acres as the other. Likewise in morals, intuition teaches me the axiom that I must love my neighbour, and reflection will deduce the proposition that I must relieve the wants of the poor to the best of my ability. But no deductive science of morals can teach me what are the wants of John Styles, nor whether he will be best relieved by alms or by employment. Where deductive science stops, the inductive one must meet it, and, by a process which modern logicians have

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named traduction, we pass from one order of reasoning to another, and complete a science of ethics practically applicable to every detail of life.

But because induction has this great work to do, because the field which experience is to measure is of vast extent, because we need it to show us *how* to obey the moral law in our hearts, not therefore must it be mistaken for that law itself. Because it has taught us how to confer happiness on our neighbour, it must not set up happiness as the sole end of morality; because it has advised our benevolence what is expedient, it must not make benevolence a matter of expediency. Let the experimentalist, by all means, teach us how to educate the masses, but let him not ask the utility of enlarging the capacity for virtue in rational souls. Let him teach us how to emancipate the slave but let him not dare to question whether restoring to one-sixth of a community the rights of manhood will, on the whole, conduce to "the greatest happiness of the greatest number."

We believe the utilitarian system to be philosophically untenable and morally paralysing to the energies of all save the noblest souls. Therefore we repudiate all imaginary connexion between it and Social Science, and maintain that though it is the office of such science to supply the experimental basis of facts on which the moral law is to take effect, yet it appeals for its impulse of duty and

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its divine sanction to a very different principle, namely, to "the law written on the hearts" of all men, whether Jew or Gentile,

"The unwritten Law Divine,
Immutable, eternal, not like these of yesterday,
But made ere time began." *

The province, then, of Social Science, as we would understand it, is simple enough. At the present stage our task is nearly the same as that which Bacon commenced for physical science in the *Novum Organon*. In the first place, a vast accumulation of facts and observations, statistics and experiments, need to be gathered and constated. Then out of these, gradually, by induction, larger generalizations will be reached, one principle after another will be ascertained, and the laws regulating public health, crime, pauperism, &c., will be discovered. It is obviously impossible at first to know where exactly to look for the more important facts, and to choose among those presented to us only such as may be of permanent value. We must be content to act like a geologist at a quarry, and be satisfied, though the workmen bring many worthless stones along with some precious fossils, out of which, by and by, may be framed a form of life and beauty all unseen hitherto by mortal eyes. The *general* benefits of the whole scheme may be summed up as follows.

* Sophocles, *Antigone*, 454.

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Of the *particular* practical achievements we will speak by and by.

1. The science itself is advanced by the accumulation, comparison, and verification of the discoveries of the leading students year by year, the facts they have noted, and the experiments they have made.

2. Individual students receive instruction and encouragement each from each, and are further immensely aided in carrying out their special tasks by acquaintance with all others similarly engaged in the kingdom, whose work and their own henceforth proceed with mutual co-operation.

3. Persons not hitherto occupied in practical philanthropy acquire an interest in one or other branch of the subject, and thenceforth give their influence, time, or money to the cause.

4. The Legislature receives with respect the opinions and advice of those who have made these matters their study, because they are now presented, not as isolated views of individuals, but as the deliberate resolutions of a large and respectable body of thinkers and workers.

In a word, the principle of associated action, whose adoption Channing so well described as one of the most distinguishing characteristics of our century, and one of the most powerful of future agencies in the world, is now applied to the promotion,