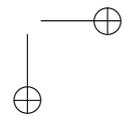
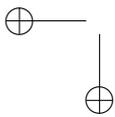


The Metaphysical Society Papers



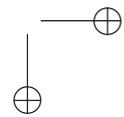
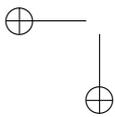




# The Metaphysical Society Papers

*Walter Bagehot*

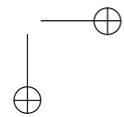
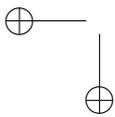
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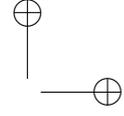
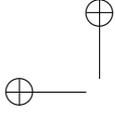




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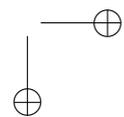
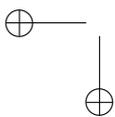
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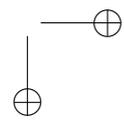
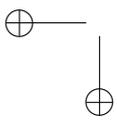
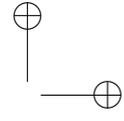
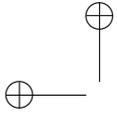


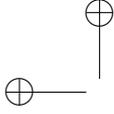


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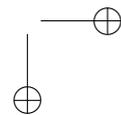
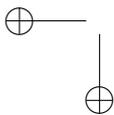


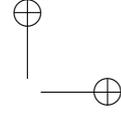
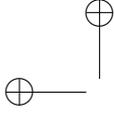
## ON THE EMOTION OF CONVICTION

Note: “On the Emotion of Conviction” was delivered before the Metaphysical Society, that astonishing collection of Victorian intellectuals, in 1871. (See Brown, A. W., 1947, *The Metaphysical Society*, Columbia University Press, for a fascinating study of the Society.)

What we commonly term Belief includes, I apprehend, both an Intellectual and an Emotional element; the first we more properly call “assent,” and the second “conviction.” The laws of the Intellectual element in belief are “the laws of evidence,” and have been elaborately discussed; but those of the Emotional part have hardly been discussed at all – indeed, its existence has been scarcely perceived.

In the mind of a rigorously trained inquirer, the process of believing is, I apprehend, this: First comes the investigation, a set of facts are sifted and a set of arguments weighed; then the



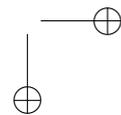
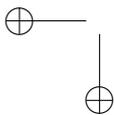


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intellect perceives the result of those arguments, and, we say, assents to it. Then an emotion more or less strong sets in, which completes the whole. In calm and quiet minds, the intellectual part of this process is so much the strongest that they are hardly conscious of anything else; and as these quiet, careful people have written our treatises, we do not find it explained in them how important the emotional part is.

But take the case of the Caliph Omar, according to Gibbon's description of him. He burnt the Alexandrine Library, saying: "All books which contain what is not in the Koran are dangerous; all those which contain what is in the Koran are useless." Probably no one ever had an intenser belief in anything than Omar had in this. Yet it is impossible to imagine it preceded by an argument. His belief in Mahomet, in the Koran, and in the sufficiency of the Koran, came to him probably in spontaneous rushes of emotion; there may have been little vestiges of argument floating here and there, but they did not justify the strength of the emotion, still less did they create it, and they hardly even excused it.

There is so commonly some considerable argument for our modern beliefs, that it is difficult now-a-days to isolate the emotional element, and therefore, on the principle that in Metaphysics



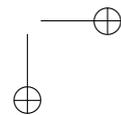
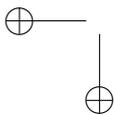


#### ON THE EMOTION OF CONVICTION

“egotism is the truest modesty,” I may give myself as an example of utterly irrational conviction. Some years ago I stood for a borough in the West of England, and after a keen contest was defeated by seven. Almost directly afterwards there was accidentally another election, and, as I would not stand, another candidate of my own side was elected, and I of course ceased to have any hold upon the place, or chance of being elected there. But for years I had the deepest conviction that I should be “Member for Bridgewater”; and no amount of reasoning would get it out of my head. The borough is now disfranchised; but even still, if I allow my mind to dwell on the contest, – if I think of the hours I was ahead in the morning, and the rush of votes at two o’clock by which I was defeated, – and even more, if I call up the image of the nomination day, with all the people’s hands outstretched, and all their excited faces looking the more different on account of their identity in posture, the old feeling almost comes back upon me, and for a moment I believe that I shall be Member for Bridgewater.

I should not mention such nonsense, except on an occasion when I may serve as an intellectual “specimen,”<sup>1</sup> but I know I wish that I could feel

<sup>1</sup>It should be stated that this essay was originally



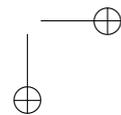
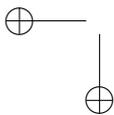


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the same hearty, vivid faith in many conclusions of which my understanding says it is satisfied, that I did in this absurdity. And if it should be replied that such folly could be no real belief, for it could not influence any man's action, I am afraid I must say that it did influence my actions. For a long time the ineradicable fatalistic feeling, that I should some time have this constituency, of which I had no chance, hung about my mind, and diminished my interest in other constituencies, where my chances of election would have been rational at any rate.

This case probably exhibits the maximum of conviction with the minimum of argument, but there are many approximations to it. Persons of untrained minds cannot long live without some belief in any topic which comes much before them. It has been said that if you can only get a middle-class Englishman to think whether there are "snails in Sirius," he will soon have an opinion on it. It will be difficult to make him think, but if he does think, he cannot rest in a negative, he will come to some decision. And on any ordinary topic, of course, it is so. A grocer has a full creed as to foreign policy, a young lady a complete theory of the sacraments,

read as a paper before a society which discussed subjects of a metaphysical nature.





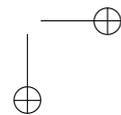
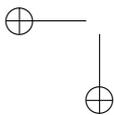
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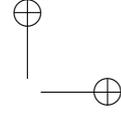
as to which neither has any doubt whatever. But in talking to such persons, I cannot but remember my Bridgwater experience, and ask whether causes like those which begat my folly may not be at the bottom of their “invincible knowledge.”

Most persons who observe their own thoughts must have been conscious of the exactly opposite state. There are cases where our intellect has gone through the arguments, and we give a clear assent to the conclusions. But our minds seem dry and unsatisfied. In that case we have the intellectual part of Belief, but want the emotional part.

That belief is not a purely intellectual matter is evident from dreams, where we are always believing, but scarcely ever arguing; and from certain forms of insanity, where fixed delusions seize upon the mind and generate a firmer belief than any sane person is capable of. These are, of course, “unorthodox” states of mind; but a good psychology must explain them, nevertheless, and perhaps it would have progressed faster if it had been more ready to compare them with the waking states of sane people.

Probably, when the subject is thoroughly examined, “conviction” will be proved to be one of the intensest of human emotions, and one





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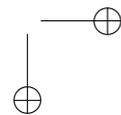
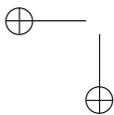
most closely connected with the bodily state. In cases like the Caliph Omar's, it governs all other desires, absorbs the whole nature, and rules the whole life. And in such cases it is accompanied or preceded by the sensation that Scott makes his seer describe as the prelude to a prophecy:

*At length the fatal answer came,  
In characters of living flame –  
Not spoke in word, nor blazed in scroll,  
But borne and branded on my soul.*<sup>2</sup>

A hot flash seems to burn across the brain. Men in these intense states of mind have altered all history, changed for better or worse the creed of myriads, and desolated or redeemed provinces and ages. Nor is this intensity a sign of truth, for it is precisely strongest in these points in which men differ most from each other. John Knox felt it in his anti-Catholicism; Ignatius Loyola in his anti-Protestantism; and both, I suppose, felt it as much as it is possible to feel it.

Once acutely felt, I believe it is indelible; at least, it does something to the mind which it is hard for anything else to undo. It has been often said that a man who has once really loved

<sup>2</sup>“Lady of the Lake,” canto iv.



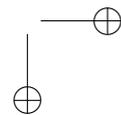
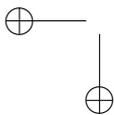


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a woman, never can be without feeling towards that woman again. He may go on loving her, or he may change and hate her. In the same way, I think, experience proves that no one who has had real passionate conviction of a creed, the sort of emotion that burns hot upon the brain, can ever be indifferent to that creed again. He may continue to believe it, and to love it; or he may change to the opposite, vehemently argue against it, and persecute it. But he cannot forget it. Years afterwards, perhaps, when life changes, when external interests cease to excite, when the apathy to surroundings which belongs to the old, begins all at once, to the wonder of later friends, who cannot imagine what is come to him, the grey-headed man returns to the creed of his youth.

The explanation of these facts in metaphysical books is very imperfect. Indeed, I only know one school which professes to explain the emotional, as distinguished from the intellectual element in belief. Mr. Bain (after Mr. Mill)<sup>3</sup> speaks very instructively of the “animal nature of belief,” but when he comes to trace its cause, his analysis seems, to me at least, utterly unsatisfactory. He says that, “the state of belief is identical

<sup>3</sup>Note 107 on chap. xi. of James Mill’s *Analysis of the Human Mind*. (Forrest Morgan.)





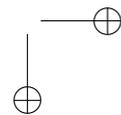
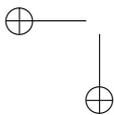
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with the activity or active disposition of the system at the moment with reference to the thing believed.” But in many cases there is firm belief where there is no possibility of action or tendency to it. A girl in a country parsonage will be sure “that Paris never can be taken,” or that “Bismarck is a wretch,” without being able to act on these ideas or wanting to act on them. Many beliefs, in Coleridge’s happy phrase, slumber in the “dormitory of the soul”;<sup>4</sup> they are present to the consciousness, but they incite to no action. And perhaps Coleridge is an example of misformed mind in which not only may “Faith” not produce “works,” but in which it had a tendency to prevent works. Strong convictions gave him a kind of cramp in the will, and he could not act on them. And in very many persons much-indulged conviction exhausts the mind with the attached ideas; teases it, and so, when the time of action comes, makes it apt to turn to different, perhaps opposite ideas, and to act on them in preference.

As far as I can perceive, the power of an idea to cause conviction, independently of any intellectual process, depends on four properties.

1st. Clearness. The more unmistakable an idea is to a particular mind, the more is that

<sup>4</sup>Aphorism 1 of *Aids to Reflection*.



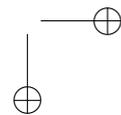
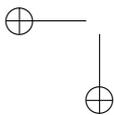


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mind predisposed to believe it. In common life we may constantly see this. If you once make a thing quite clear to a person, the chances are that you will almost have persuaded him of it. Half the world only understand what they believe, and always believe what they understand.

2nd. Intensity. This is the main cause why the ideas that flash on the minds of seers, as in Scott's description, are believed; they come mostly when the nerves are exhausted by fasting, watching and longing; they have a peculiar brilliancy, and therefore they are believed. To this cause I trace too my fixed folly as to Bridgewater. The idea of being member for the town had been so intensely brought home to me by the excitement of a contest, that I could not eradicate it, and that as soon as I recalled any circumstances of the contest it always came back in all its vividness.

3rd. Constancy. As a rule, almost every one does accept the creed of the place in which he lives, and everyone without exception has a tendency to do so. There are, it is true, some minds which a mathematician might describe as minds of "contrary flexure," whose particular bent it is to contradict what those around them say. And the reason is that in their minds the opposite aspect of every subject is always vividly



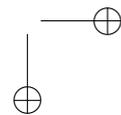
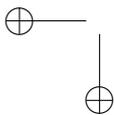


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presented. But even such minds usually accept the axioms of their district, the tenets which everybody always believes. They only object to the variable elements; to the inferences and deductions drawn by some, but not by all.

4th. On the Interestingness of the idea, by which I mean the power of the idea to gratify some wish or want of the mind. The most obvious is curiosity about something which is important to me. Rumours that gratify this excite a sort of half-conviction without the least evidence, and with a very little evidence a full, eager, not to say a bigoted one. If a person go into a mixed company, and say authoritatively "that the Cabinet is nearly divided on the Russian question, and that it was only decided by one vote to send Lord Granville's despatch," most of the company will attach some weight more or less to the story, without asking how the secret was known. And if the narrator casually add that he has just seen a subordinate member of the Government, most of the hearers will go away and repeat the anecdote with grave attention, though it does not in the least appear that the lesser functionary told the anecdote about the Cabinet, or that he knew what passed at it.

And the interest is greater when the news falls in with the bent of the hearer. A sanguine



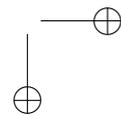
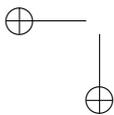


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man will believe with scarcely any evidence that good luck is coming, and a dismal man that bad luck is coming. As far as I can make out, the professional “bulls” and “bears” of the City do believe a great deal of what they say, though, of course, there are exceptions, and though neither the most sanguine “bull” nor the most dismal “bear” can believe all he says.

Of course, I need not say that this “quality” peculiarly attaches to the greatest problems of human life. The firmest convictions of the most inconsistent answers to the everlasting questions “whence?” and “whither?” have been generated by this “interestingness” without evidence on which one would invest a penny.

In one case, these causes of irrational conviction seem contradictory. Clearness, as we have seen, is one of them; but obscurity, when obscure things are interesting, is a cause too. But there is no real difficulty here. Human nature at different times exhibits contrasted impulses. There is a passion for sensualism, that is, to eat and drink; and a passion for asceticism, that is, not to eat and drink; so it is quite likely that the clearness of an idea may sometimes cause a movement of conviction, and that the obscurity of another idea may at other times cause one too.

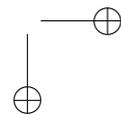
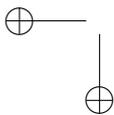




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These laws, however, are complex – can they be reduced to any simpler law of human nature? I confess I think that they can, but at the same time I do not presume to speak with the same confidence about it that I have upon other points. Hitherto I have been dealing with the common facts of the adult human mind, as we may see it in others and feel it in ourselves. But I am now going to deal with the “prehistoric” period of the mind in early childhood, as to which there is necessarily much obscurity.

My theory is, that in the first instance a child believes everything. Some of its states of consciousness are perceptive or presentative, – that is, they tell it of some heat or cold, some resistance or non-resistance, then and there present. Other states of consciousness are representative, – that is, they say that certain sensations could be felt or certain facts perceived, in time past or in time to come, or at some place, no matter at what time, then and there out of the reach of perception and sensation. In mature life, too, we have these presentative and representative states in every sort of mixture, but we make a distinction between them. Without remark and without doubt, we believe the “evidence of our senses,” that is, the facts of present sensation and perception; but we do not believe at once



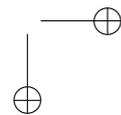
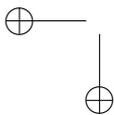


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and instantaneously the representative states as to what is non-present, whether in time or space. But I apprehend that this is an acquired distinction, and that in early childhood every state of consciousness is believed, whether it be presentative or representative.

Certainly at the beginning of the “historic” period we catch the mind at a period of extreme credulity. When memory begins, and when speech and signs suffice to make a child intelligible, belief is almost omnipresent, and doubt almost never to be found. Childlike credulity is a phrase of the highest antiquity, and of the greatest present aptness.

So striking, indeed, on certain points, is this impulse to believe, that philosophers have invented various theories to explain in detail some of its marked instances. Thus it has been said that children have an intuitive disposition to believe in “testimony” – that is, in the correctness of statements orally made to them. And that they do so is certain. Every child believes what the footman tells it, what its nurse tells it, and what its mother tells it, and probably every one’s memory will carry him back to the horrid mass of miscellaneous confusion which he acquired by believing all he heard. But though it is certain that a child believes all assertions

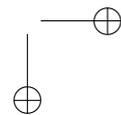
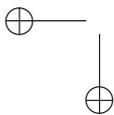




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made to it, it is not certain that the child so believes in consequence of a special intuitive predisposition restricted to such assertions. It may be that this indiscriminate belief in all sayings is but a relic of an omnivorous acquiescence in all states of consciousness, which is only just extinct when childhood is plain enough to be understood, or old enough to be remembered.

Again, it has been said much more plausibly that we want an intuitive tendency to account for our belief in memory. But I question whether it can be shown that a little child does believe in its memories more confidently than in its imaginations. A child of my acquaintance corrected its mother, who said that "they should never see" two of its dead brothers again, and maintained, "Oh yes, mamma, we shall; we shall see them in heaven, and they will be so glad to see us." And then the child cried with disappointment because its mother, though a most religious lady, did not seem exactly to feel that seeing her children in that manner was as good as seeing them on earth. Now I doubt if that child did not believe this expectation quite as confidently as it believed any past fact, or as it could believe anything at all, and though the conclusion may be true, plainly the child believed, not from the efficacy of the external evidence, but from a

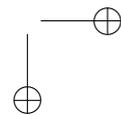
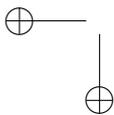




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strong rush of inward confidence. Why, then, should we want a special intuition to make children believe past facts when, in truth, they go farther and believe with no kind of difficulty future facts as well as past?

If on so abstruse a matter I might be allowed a graphic illustration, I should define doubt as "hesitation produced by collision." A child possessed with the notion that all its fancies are true, finds that acting on one of them brings its head against the table. This gives it pain, and makes it hesitate as to the expediency of doing it again. Early childhood is an incessant education in scepticism, and early youth is so too. All boys are always knocking their heads against the physical world, and all young men are constantly knocking their heads against the social world. And both of them from the same cause – that they are subject to an eruption of emotion which engenders a strong belief, but which is as likely to cause a belief in falsehood as in truth. Gradually, under the tuition of a painful experience, we come to learn that our strongest convictions may be quite false, that many of our most cherished ones are and have been false; and this causes us to seek a "criterion" as to which beliefs are to be trusted and which are not; and so we are beaten back to





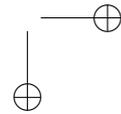
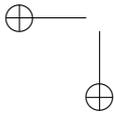
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the laws of evidence for our guide, though, as Bishop Butler said, in a similar case, we object to be bound by anything so “poor.”<sup>5</sup>

That it is really this contention with the world which destroys conviction and which causes doubt, is shown by examining the cases where the mind is secluded from the world. In “dreams,” where we are out of collision with fact, we accept everything as it comes, believe everything and doubt nothing. And in violent cases of mania, where the mind is shut up within itself, and cannot, from impotence, perceive what is without, it is as sure of the most chance fancy, as in health it would be of the best proved truths.

And upon this theory we perceive why the four tendencies to irrational conviction which I have set down, survive, and remain in our adult hesitating state as vestiges of our primitive all-believing state. They are all from various causes “adhesive” states – states which it is very difficult to get rid of, and which, in consequence, have retained their power of creating belief in the mind, when other states, which once possessed it too, have quite lost it. Clear ideas are certainly more difficult to get rid of than obscure ones. Indeed, some obscure ones we cannot recover, if we once lose them. Everybody,

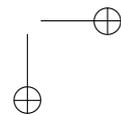
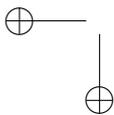
<sup>5</sup> *Analogy*, part ii., chap. viii., 4th paragraph.





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perhaps, has felt all manner of doubts and difficulties in mastering a mathematical problem. At the time, the difficulties seemed as real as the problem, but a day or two after a man has mastered it, he will be wholly unable to imagine or remember where the difficulties were. The demonstration will be perfectly clear to him, and he will be unable to comprehend how any one should fail to perceive it. For life he will recall the clear ideas, but the obscure ones he will never recall, though for some hours, perhaps, they were painful, confused, and oppressive obstructions. Intense ideas are, as every one will admit, recalled more easily than slight and weak ideas. Constantly impressed ideas are brought back by the world around us, and if they are so often, get so tied to our other ideas that we can hardly wrench them away. Interesting ideas stick in the mind by the associations which give them interest. All the minor laws of conviction resolve themselves into this great one: "That at first we believe all which occurs to us – that afterwards we have a tendency to believe that which we cannot help often occurring to us, and that this tendency is stronger or weaker in some sort of proportion to our inability to prevent the recurrence." When the inability to prevent the recurrence of the idea is very great, so that





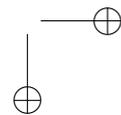
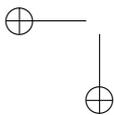
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the reason is powerless on the mind, the consequent “conviction” is an eager, irritable, and ungovernable passion.

If these principles are true, they suggest some lessons which are not now accepted. They prove:

1. That we should be very careful how we let ourselves believe that which may turn out to be error. Milton says that “error is but opinion,” meaning true opinion, “in the making.” But when the conviction of any error is a strong passion, it leaves, like all other passions, a permanent mark on the mind. We can never be as if we had never felt it. “Once a heretic, always a heretic,” is thus far true, that a mind once given over to a passionate conviction is never as fit as it would otherwise have been to receive the truth on the same subject. Years after the passion may return upon him, and inevitably small recurrences of it will irritate his intelligence and disturb its calm. We cannot at once expel a familiar idea, and so long as the idea remains, its effect will remain too.

2. That we must always keep an account in our minds of the degree of evidence on which we hold our convictions, and be most careful that we do not permanently permit ourselves to feel a stronger conviction than the evidence justifies. If we do, since evidence is the only



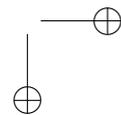
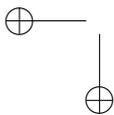


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criterion of truth, we may easily get a taint of error that may be hard to clear away. This may seem obvious, yet, if I do not mistake, Father Newman's Grammar of Assent is little else than a systematic treatise designed to deny and confute it.

3. That if we do, as in life we must sometimes, indulge a "provisional enthusiasm," as it may be called, for an idea – for example, if an orator in the excitement of speaking does not keep his phrases to probability, and if in the hurry of emotion he quite believes all he says, his plain duty is on other occasions to watch himself carefully, and to be sure that he does not as a permanent creed believe what in a peculiar and temporary state he was led to say he felt and to feel.

Similarly, we are all in our various departments of life in the habit of assuming various probabilities as if they were certainties. In Lombard Street the dealers assume that "Messrs. Baring's acceptance at three months' date is sure to be paid," and that "Peel's Act will always be suspended in a panic." And the familiarity of such ideas makes it nearly impossible for any one who spends his day in Lombard Street to doubt of them. But, nevertheless, a

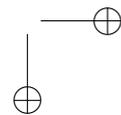
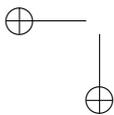




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person who takes care of his mind will keep up the perception that they are not certainties.

Lastly, we should utilise this intense emotion of conviction as far as we can. Dry minds, which give an intellectual “assent” to conclusions which feel no strong glow of faith in them, often do not know what their opinions are. They have every day to go over the arguments again, or to refer to a note-book to know what they believe. But intense convictions make a memory for themselves, and if they can be kept to the truths of which there is good evidence, they give a readiness of intellect, a confidence in action, a consistency in character, which are not to be had without them. For a time, indeed, they give these benefits when the propositions believed are false, but then they spoil the mind for seeing the truth, and they are very dangerous, because the believer may discover his error, and a perplexity of intellect, a hesitation in action, and an inconsistency in character are the sure consequences of an entire collapse in pervading and passionate conviction.

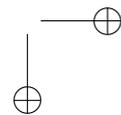
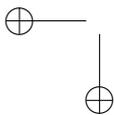




## ON THE METAPHYSICAL BASIS OF TOLERATION

Note: “On the Metaphysical Basis of Toleration” was delivered before the Metaphysical Society in 1874. It provides, according to John Halsted, the most succinct statement of Bagehot’s position on free expression of opinion and demonstrates the essential liberalism of his social and political ideas. (See Halsted, John, 1958, “Walter Bagehot on Toleration,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 19, 119–128.)

One of the most marked peculiarities of recent times in England is the increased liberty in the expression of opinion. Things are now said constantly and without remark, which even ten years ago would have caused a hubbub, and have drawn upon those who said them much obloquy. But already I think there are signs of a reaction. In many quarters of orthodox opinion I observe a disposition to say, “Surely

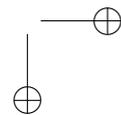
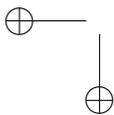


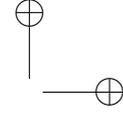


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this is going too far; really we cannot allow such things to be said.” And what is more curious, some writers, whose pens are just set at liberty, and who would, not at all long ago, have been turned out of society for the things that they say, are setting themselves to explain the “weakness” of liberty, and to extol the advantages of persecution. As it appears to me that the new practice of this country is a great improvement on its old one, and as I conceive that the doctrine of toleration rests on what may be called a metaphysical basis, I wish shortly to describe what that basis is.

I should say that, except where it is explained to the contrary, I use the word “toleration” to mean toleration by law. Toleration by society of matters not subject to legal penalty is a kindred subject on which, if I have room, I will add a few words, but in the main I propose to deal with the simpler subject, – toleration by law. And by toleration, too, I mean, when it is not otherwise said, toleration in the public expression of opinions. Toleration of acts and practices is another allied subject on which I can, in a paper like this, but barely hope to indicate what seems to me to be the truth. And I should add, that I deal only with the discussion of impersonal doctrines. The law of libel, which deals with accusations of



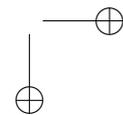
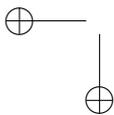


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living persons, is a topic requiring consideration by itself.

Meaning this by “toleration,” I do not think we ought to be surprised at a reaction against it. What was said long ago of slavery seems to be equally true of persecution, – it “exists by the law of nature.” It is so congenial to human nature, that it has arisen everywhere in past times, as history shows; that the cessation of it is a matter of recent times in England; that even now, taking the world as a whole, the practice and the theory of it are in a triumphant majority. Most men have always much preferred persecution, and do so still; and it is therefore only natural that it should continually reappear in discussion and argument.

One mode in which it tempts human nature is very obvious. Persons of strong opinions wish, above all things, to propagate those opinions. They find close at hand what seems an immense engine for that propagation; they find the State, which has often in history interfered for and against opinions, – which has had a great and undeniable influence in helping some and hindering others, – and in their eagerness they can hardly understand why they should not make use of this great engine to crush the errors which they hate, and to replace them with the tenets

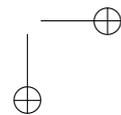
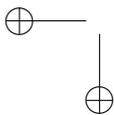




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they approve. So long as there are earnest believers in the world, they will always wish to punish opinions, even if their judgment tells them it is unwise, and their conscience that it is wrong. They may not gratify their inclination, but the inclination will not be the less real.

Since the time of Carlyle, “earnestness” has been a favourite virtue in literature, and it is customary to treat this wish to twist other people’s belief into ours as if it were a part of the love of truth. And in the highest minds so it may be. But the mass of mankind have, as I hold, no such fine motive. Independently of truth or falsehood, the spectacle of a different belief from ours is disagreeable to us, in the same way that the spectacle of a different form of dress and manners is disagreeable. A set of schoolboys will persecute a new boy with a new sort of jacket; they will hardly let him have a new-shaped penknife. Grown-up people are just as bad, except when culture has softened them. A mob will hoot a foreigner who looks very unlike themselves. Much of the feeling of “earnest believers” is, I believe, altogether the same. They wish others to think as they do, not only because they wish to diffuse doctrinal truth, but also and much more because they cannot bear to hear the words of a creed differ-

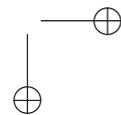
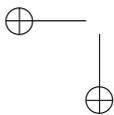


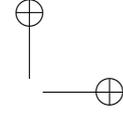


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ent from their own. At any rate, without further analysing the origin of the persecuting impulse, its deep root in human nature, and its great power over most men, are evident.

But this natural impulse was not the only motive – perhaps was not the principal one – of historical persecutions. The main one, or a main one, was a most ancient political idea which once ruled the world, and of which deep vestiges are still to be traced on many sides. The most ancient conception of a State is that of a “religious partnership,” in which any member may by his acts bring down the wrath of the gods on the other members, and, so to speak, on the whole company. This danger was, in the conception of the time, at once unlimited and inherited; in any generation, partners A, C, D, etc., might suffer loss of life, or health, or goods – the whole association even might perish, because in a past generation the ancestors of Z had somehow offended the gods. Thus the historian of Athens tells us that after a particular act of sacrilege – a breach of the local privileges of sanctuary – the perpetrators were compelled “to retire into banishment”; and that those who had died before the date he is speaking of were “disinterred and cast beyond the borders.” “Yet,” he adds, “their exile continuing, as it did, only



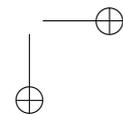
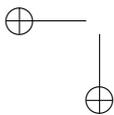


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for a time, was not held sufficient to expiate the impiety for which they have been condemned. The Alkmæonids, one of the most powerful families in Attica, long continued to be looked upon as a tainted race, and in cases of public calamity were liable to be singled out as having by their sacrilege drawn down the judgment of the gods upon their countrymen.”<sup>6</sup> And as false opinions about the gods have almost always been thought to be peculiarly odious to them, the misbeliever, the “miscreant,” has been almost always thought to be likely not only to impair hereafter the salvation of himself and others in a future world, but also to bring on his neighbours and his nation grievous calamities immediately in this. He has been persecuted to stop political danger more than to arrest intellectual error.

But it will be said: Put history aside, and come to things now. Why should not those who are convinced that certain doctrines are errors, that they are most dangerous, that they may ruin man’s welfare here and his salvation hereafter, use the power of the State to extirpate those errors? Experience seems to show that the power of the State can be put forth in that way effectually. Why, then, should it not be put forth? If I had room, I should like for a moment

<sup>6</sup>Grote’s *History of Greece*, part ii., chap. x.

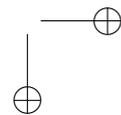
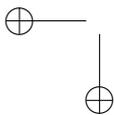


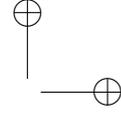


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to criticise the word “effectually.” I should say that the State, in the cases where it is most wanted, is not of the use which is thought. I admit that it extirpates error, but I doubt if it creates belief – at least, if it does so in cases where the persecuted error is suitable to the place and time. In such cases, I think the effect has often been to eradicate a heresy among the few, at the cost of creating a scepticism among the many; to kill the error no doubt, but also to ruin the general belief. And this is the cardinal point, for the propagation of the “truth” is the end of persecution; all else is only a means. But I have not space to discuss this, and will come to the main point.

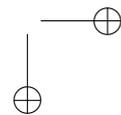
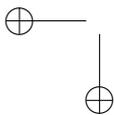
I say that the State power should not be used to arrest discussion, because the State power may be used equally for truth or error, for Mohammedanism or Christianity, for belief or no-belief, but in discussion truth has an advantage. Arguments always tell for truth as such, and against error as such; if you let the human mind alone, it has a preference for good argument over bad; it oftener takes truth than not. But if you do not let it alone, you give truth no advantage at all; you substitute a game of force, where all doctrines are equal, for a game of logic, where the truer have the better chance.

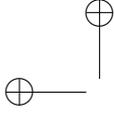




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The process by which truth wins in discussion is this, – certain strong and eager minds embrace original opinions, seldom all wrong, never quite true, but of a mixed sort, part truth, part error. These they inculcate on all occasions, and on every side, and gradually bring the cooler sort of men to a hearing of them. These cooler people serve as quasi-judges, while the more eager ones are a sort of advocates; a Court of Inquisition is sitting perpetually, investigating, informally and silently, but not ineffectually, what, on all great subjects of human interest, is truth and error. There is no sort of infallibility about the court; often it makes great mistakes, most of its decisions are incomplete in thought and imperfect in expression. Still, on the whole, the force of evidence keeps it right. The truth has the best of the proof, and therefore wins most of the judgments. The process is slow, far more tedious than the worst Chancery suit. Time in it is reckoned not by days, but by years, or rather by centuries. Yet, on the whole, it creeps along, if you do not stop it. But all is arrested, if persecution begins – if you have a *coup d'état*, and let loose soldiers on the court; for it is perfect chance which litigant turns them in, or what creed they are used to compel men to believe.

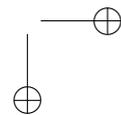
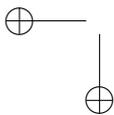




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This argument, however, assumes two things. In the first place, it presupposes that we are speaking of a state of society in which discussion is possible. And such societies are not very common. Uncivilised man is not capable of discussion: savages have been justly described as having “the intellect of children with the passions and strength of men.”<sup>7</sup> Before anything like speculative argument can be used with them, their intellect must be strengthened and their passions restrained. There was, as it seems to me, a long preliminary period before human nature, as we now see it, existed, and while it was being formed. During that preliminary period, persecution, like slavery, played a most considerable part. Nations mostly became nations by having a common religion. It was a necessary condition of the passage from a loose aggregate of savages to a united polity, that they should believe in the same gods and worship these gods in the same way. What was necessary was, that they should for a long period – for centuries, perhaps – lead the same life and conform to the same usages. They believed that the “gods of their fathers” had commanded these usages. Early law is hardly to be separated from religious ritual: it is more like the tradition of a Church

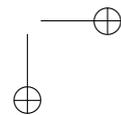
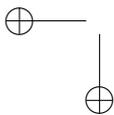
<sup>7</sup>Sir John Lubbock’s *Prehistoric Times*, p. 465.





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than the enactments of a statute-book. It is a thing essentially immemorial and sacred. It is not conceived of as capable either of addition or diminution; it is a body of holy customs which no one is allowed either to break or to impugn. The use of these is to aid in creating a common national character, which in aftertimes may be tame enough to bear discussion, and which may suggest common axioms upon which discussion can be founded. Till that common character has been formed, discussion is impossible; it cannot be used to find out truth, for it cannot exist; it is not that we have to forgo its efficacy on purpose, we have not the choice of it, for its prerequisites cannot be found. The case of civil liberty is, as I conceive, much the same. Early ages need a coercive despotism more than they need anything else. The age of debate comes later. An omnipotent power to enforce the sacred law is that which is then most required. A constitutional opposition would be born before its time. It would be dragging the wheel before the horses were harnessed. The strongest advocates both of liberty and toleration may consistently hold that there were unhappy ages before either became possible, and when attempts at either would have been pernicious.

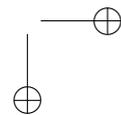
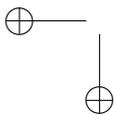




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The case is analogous to that of education. Every parent wisely teaches his child his own creed, and till the child has attained a certain age, it is better that he should not hear too much of any other. His mind will in the end be better able to weigh arguments, because it does not begin to weigh them so early. He will hardly comprehend any creed unless he has been taught some creed. But the restrictions of childhood must be relaxed in youth, and abandoned in manhood. One object of education is to train us for discussion, and as that training gradually approaches to completeness, we should gradually begin to enter into and to take part in discussion. The restrictions that are useful at nine years old are pernicious at nineteen.

This analogy would have seemed to me obvious, but there are many most able persons who turn the matter just the other way. They regard the discipline of education as a precedent for persecution. They say, "I would no sooner let the nation at large read that bad book than I would let my children read it." They refuse to admit that the age of the children makes any difference. At heart they think that they are wiser than the mass of mankind, just as they are wiser than their children, and would regulate the studies of both unhesitatingly. But experi-

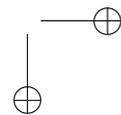
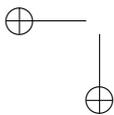




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ence shows that no man is on all points so wise as the mass of men are after a good discussion, and that if the ideas of the very wisest were by miracle to be fixed on the race, the certain result would be to stereotype monstrous error. If we fixed the belief of Bacon, we should believe that the earth went round the sun; if we fixed that of Newton, we should believe “that the Argonautic expedition was a real event, and occurred 937 BC; that Hercules was a real person, and delivered Theseus, another real person, 936 BC; that in the year 1036 Ceres, a woman of Sicily, in seeking her daughter who was stolen, came into Attica, and there taught the Greeks to sow corn.” And the worst is, that the minds of most would-be persecutors are themselves unfixed: their opinions are in a perpetual flux; they would persecute all others for tenets which yesterday they had not heard of and which they will not believe to-morrow.

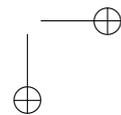
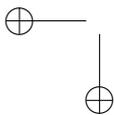
But it will be said, the theory of Toleration is not so easy as that of education. We know by a certain fact when a young man is grown up and can bear discussion. We judge by his age, as to which every one is agreed. But we cannot tell by any similar patent fact when a State is mature enough to bear discussion. There may be two opinions about it. And I quite agree that

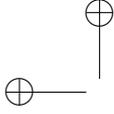




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the matter of fact is more difficult to discover in one case than in the other; still it is a matter of fact which the rulers of the State must decide upon their responsibility, and as best they can. And the highest sort of rulers will decide it like the English in India – with no reference to their own belief. For years the English prohibited the preaching of Christianity in India, though it was their own religion, because they thought that it could not be tranquilly listened to. They now permit it, because they find that the population can bear the discussion. Of course, most Governments are wholly unequal to so high a morality and so severe a self-command. The Governments of most countries are composed of persons who wish everybody to believe as they do, merely because they do. Some here and there, from a higher motive, so eagerly wish to propagate their opinions, that they are unequal to consider the problem of toleration impartially. They persecute till the persecuted become strong enough to make them desist. But the delicacy of a rule and the unwillingness of Governments to adopt it, do not prove that it is not the best and the right one. There are already in inevitable jurisprudence many lines of vital importance just as difficult to draw. The line between sanity and insanity has necessarily to be drawn, and it

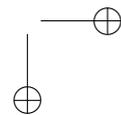
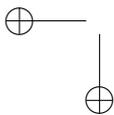




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is as nice as anything can be. The competency of people to bear discussion is not intrinsically more difficult than their competency to manage their own affairs, though perhaps a Government is less likely to be impartial and more likely to be biassed in questions of discussion than in pecuniary ones.

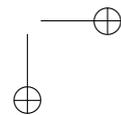
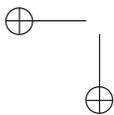
Secondly, the doctrine that rulers are to permit discussion, assumes not only, as we have seen, that discussion is possible, but also that discussion will not destroy the Government. No Government is bound to permit a controversy which will annihilate itself. It is a trustee for many duties, and if possible, it must retain the power to perform those duties. The controversies which may ruin it are very different in different countries. The Government of the day must determine in each case what those questions are. If the Roman Emperors who persecuted Christianity really did so because they imagined that Christianity would destroy the Roman Empire, I think they are to be blamed not for their misconception of duty, but for their mistake of fact. The existence of Christianity was not really more inconsistent with the existence of the Empire in the time of Diocletian than in that of Constantine; but if Diocletian thought that it was inconsistent, it was his duty to preserve the Empire.





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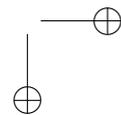
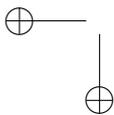
It will be asked, "What do you mean by preserving a society? All societies are in a state of incipient change; the best of them are often the most changing; what is meant, then, by saying you will 'preserve' any? You admit that you cannot keep them unaltered, what then do you propose to do?" I answer that, in this respect, the life of societies is like the life of the individuals composing them. You cannot interfere so as to keep a man's body unaltered; you can interfere so as to keep him alive. What changes in such cases will be fatal, is a question of fact. The Government must determine what will, so to say, "break up the whole thing" and what will not. No doubt it may decide wrong. In France, the country of experiments, General Cavaignac said, "A Government which allows its principle to be discussed, is a lost Government," and therefore he persecuted on behalf of the Republic, thinking it was essential to society. Louis Napoleon similarly persecuted on behalf of the Second Empire; M. Thiers on behalf of the Republic again; the Duc de Broglie now persecutes on behalf of the existing nondescript. All these may be mistakes, or some of them, or none. Here, as before, the practical difficulties in the application of a rule do not disprove its being the true and the only one.





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It will be objected that this principle is applicable only to truths which are gained by discussion. "We admit," such objectors say, "that where discussion is the best or the only means of proving truth, it is unadvisable to prohibit that discussion, but there are other means besides discussion of arriving at truth, which are sometimes better than discussion even where discussion is applicable, and sometimes go beyond it and attain regions in which it is inapplicable; and where those more efficient means are applicable, it may be wise to prohibit discussion, for in these instances discussion may confuse the human mind and impede it in the use of those higher means. The case is analogous to that of the eyes. For the most part it is a sound rule to tell persons who want to see things, that they must necessarily use both their eyes, and rely on them. But there are cases in which that rule is wrong. If a man wants to see things too distant for the eyes, as the satellites of Jupiter and the ring of Saturn, you must tell him, on the contrary, to shut one eye and look through a telescope with the other. The ordinary mode of using the common instruments may, in exceptional cases, interfere with the right use of the supplementary instruments." And I quite admit that there are such exceptional cases and such



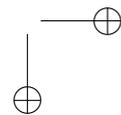
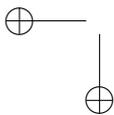


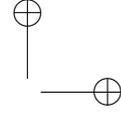
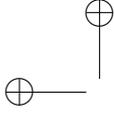
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additional means; but I say that their existence introduces no new difficulty into the subject, and that it is no reason for prohibiting discussion except in the cases in which we have seen already that it was advisable to prohibit it.

Putting the matter in the most favourable way for these objectors, and making all possible concessions to them, I believe the exceptions which they contend for must come at last to three.

First, there are certain necessary propositions which the human mind *will* think, must think, and cannot help thinking. For example, we must believe that things which are equal to the same thing are equal to each other, – that a thing cannot *both* be and not be, – that it must *either* be or not be. These truths are not gained by discussion; on the contrary, discussion presupposes at least some of them, for you cannot argue without first principles any more than you can use a lever without a fulcrum. The prerequisites of reasoning must somehow be recognised by the human mind before we begin to reason. So much is obvious, but then it is obvious also that in such cases attempts at discussion cannot do any harm. If the human mind has in it certain first principles which it cannot help seeing, and which it accepts of itself, there is no harm in

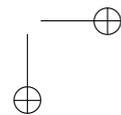
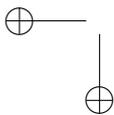




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arguing against those first principles. You may contend as long as you like, that things which are equal to the same thing are not equal to each other, or that a thing can both exist and not exist at the same time, but you will not convince any one. If you could convince any one you would do him irreparable harm, for you would hurt the basis of his mind and destroy the use of his reason. But happily you cannot convince him. That which the human mind cannot help thinking it cannot help thinking, and discussion can no more remove the primary perceptions than it can produce them. The multiplication table will remain the multiplication table, neither more nor less, however much we may argue either for it or against it.

But, though the denial of the real necessary perceptions of the human mind cannot possibly do any harm, the denial of alleged necessary perceptions is often essential to the discovery of truth. The human mind, as experience shows, is apt to manufacture sham self-evidences. The most obvious case is, that men perpetually “do sums” wrong. If we dwell long enough and intently enough on the truths of arithmetic they are in each case self-evident; but, if we are too quick, or let our minds get dull, we may make any number of mistakes. A certain deliberation

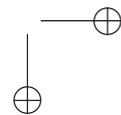
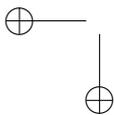




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and a certain intensity are both essential to correctness in the matter. Fictitious necessities of thought will be imposed on us without end unless we are careful. The greatest minds are not exempt from the risk of such mistakes even in matters most familiar to them. On the contrary, the history of science is full of cases in which the ablest men and the most experienced assumed that it was impossible to think things which are in matter of fact true, and which it has since been found possible to think quite easily. The mode in which these sham self-evidences are distinguished from the real ones is by setting as many minds as possible to try as often as possible whether they can help thinking the thing or not. But such trials will never exist without discussion. So far, therefore, the existence of self-evidences in the human mind is not a reason for discouraging discussion, but a reason for encouraging it.

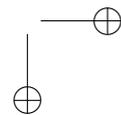
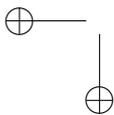
Next, it is certainly true that many conclusions which are by no means self-evident and which are gradually obtained, nevertheless, are not the result of discussion. For example, the opinion of a man as to the characters of his friends and acquaintances is not the result of distinct argument, but the aggregate of distinct impressions: it is not the result of an investi-





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gation consciously pursued, but the effect of a multiplicity of facts involuntarily presented; it is a definite thing and has a most definite influence on the mind, but its origin is indefinite and not to be traced; it is like a great fund raised in very small subscriptions and of which the subscribers' names are lost. But here again, though these opinions too were not gained by discussion, their existence is a reason for promoting discussion, not for preventing it. Every-day experience shows that these opinions as to character are often mistaken in the last degree. Human character is a most complex thing, and the impressions which different people form of it are as various as the impressions which the inhabitants of an impassable mountain have of its shape and size. Each observer has an aggregate idea derived from certain actions and certain sayings, but the real man has always or almost always said a thousand sayings of a kind quite different and in a connection quite different; he has done a vast variety of actions among "other men" and "other minds"; a mobile person will often seem hardly the same if you meet him in very different societies. And how, except by discussion, is the true character of such a person to be decided? Each observer must bring his contingent to the list of data; those data must be arranged and

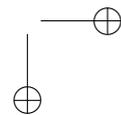
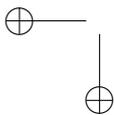


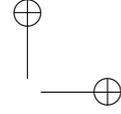


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made use of. The certain and positive facts as to which every one is agreed must have their due weight; they must be combined and compared with the various impressions as to which no two people exactly coincide. A rough summary must be made of the whole. In no other way is it possible to arrive at the truth of the matter. Without discussion each mind is dependent on its own partial observation. A great man is one image – one thing, so to speak – to his valet, another to his son, another to his wife, another to his greatest friend. None of these must be stereotyped; all must be compared. To prohibit discussion is to prohibit the corrective process.

Lastly, I hold that there are first principles or first perceptions which are neither the result of constant though forgotten trials like those last spoken of, nor common to all the race like the first. The most obvious seem to me to be the principles of taste. The primary perceptions of beauty vary much in different persons, and for different persons at different times, but no one can say that they are not most real and most influential parts of human nature. There is hardly a thing made by human hands which is not affected more or less by the conception of beauty felt by the maker; and there is hardly a human life which would not have been different



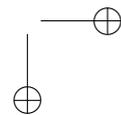
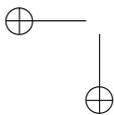


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if the idea of beauty in the mind of the man who lived it had been different.

But certainly it would not answer to exclude subjects of taste from discussion, and to allow one school of taste-teachers to reign alone, and to prohibit the teaching of all rival schools. The effect would be to fix on all ages the particular ideas of one age on a matter which is beyond most others obscure and difficult to reduce to a satisfactory theory. The human mind evidently differs at various times immensely in its conclusions upon it, and there is nothing to show that the era of the persecutor is wiser than any other era, or that his opinion is better than any one else's.

The case of these variable first principles is much like that of the "personal equation," as it is called in the theory of observations. Some observers, it is found, habitually see a given phenomenon, say the star coming to the meridian, a little sooner than most others; some later; no two persons exactly coincide. The first thing done when a new man comes into an observatory for practical work is to determine whether he sees quick or slow; and this is called the "personal equation." But, according to the theory of persecution, the national astronomer in each country would set up his own mind as the stan-

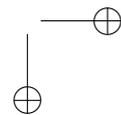
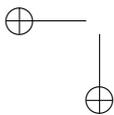




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dard; in one country he would be a quick man, and would not let the slow people contest what he said; in another he would be a slow man, and would not tolerate the quick people, or let men speak their minds; and so the astronomical observations – the astronomical *creeds* if I may say so – of different countries would radically differ. But as toleration and discussion are allowed, no such absurd result follows. The observations of different minds are compared with those of others, and truth is assumed to lie in the mean between the errors of the quick people and the errors of the slow ones.

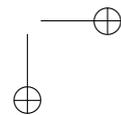
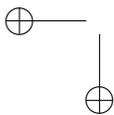
No such accurate result can be expected in more complex matters. The phenomena of astronomical observation relate only to very simple events, and to a very simple fact about these events. But perceptions of beauty have an infinite complexity: they are all subtle aggregates of countless details, and about each of these details probably every mind in some degree differs from every other one. But in a rough way the same sort of agreement is possible. Discussion is only an organised mode by which various minds compare their conclusions with those of various others. Bold and strong minds describe graphic and definite impressions: at first sight these impressions seem wholly different. Writers of the

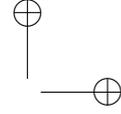




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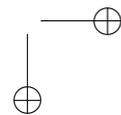
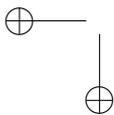
last century thought classical architecture altogether superior to Gothic; many writers now put it just the other way, and maintain a medieval cathedral to be a thing altogether superior in kind and nature to anything classical. For years the world thought Claude's landscapes perfect. Then came Mr. Ruskin, and by his ability and eloquence he has made a whole generation depreciate them, and think Turner's altogether superior. The extrication of truth by such discussions is very slow; it is often retarded; it is often thrown back; it often seems to pause for ages. But upon the whole it makes progress, and the principle of that progress is this: Each mind which is true to itself, and which draws its own impressions carefully, and which compares those impressions with the impressions of others, arrives at certain conclusions, which as far as that mind is concerned are ultimate, and are its highest conclusions. These it sets down as expressively as it can on paper, or communicates by word of mouth, and these again form data which other minds can contrast with their own. In this incessant comparison eccentric minds fall off on every side; some like Milton, some Wordsworth, some can see nothing in Dryden, some find Racine intolerably dull, some think Shakespeare barbarous, others consider the con-





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tents of the Iliad “battles and schoolboy stuff.” With history it is the same; some despise one great epoch, some another. Each epoch has its violent partisans, who will listen to nothing else, and who think every other epoch in comparison mean and wretched. These violent minds are always faulty and sometimes absurd, but they are almost always useful to mankind. They compel men to hear neglected truth. They uniformly exaggerate their gospel; but it generally is a gospel. Carlyle said many years since of the old Poor-law in England: “It being admitted then that outdoor relief should at once cease, what means did great Nature take to make it cease? She created various men who thought the cessation of outdoor relief the one thing needful.” In the same way, it being desirable that the taste of men should be improved on some point, Nature’s instrument on that point is some man of genius, of attractive voice and limited mind, who declaims and insists, not only that the special improvement is a good thing in itself, but the best of all things, and the root of all other good things. Most useful, too, are others less apparent; shrinking, sensitive, testing minds, of whom often the world knows nothing, but each of whom is in the circle just near him an authority on taste, and communicates by

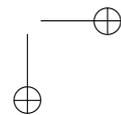
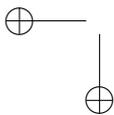


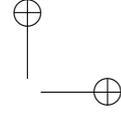
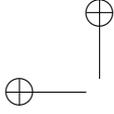


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personal influence the opinions he has formed. The human mind of a certain maturity, if left alone, prefers real beauty to sham beauty, and prefers it the sooner if original men suggest new charms, and quiet men criticise and judge of them.

But an esthetical persecution would derange all this, for generally the compulsive power would be in the hands of the believers in some tradition. The State represents “the rough force of society,” and is little likely to be amenable to new charms or new ideas; and therefore the first victim of the persecution would be the original man who was proposing that which in the end would most improve mankind; and the next would be the testing and discerning critic who was examining these ideas and separating the chaff from the wheat in them. Neither would conform to the old tradition. The inventor would be too eager; the critic too scrupulous; and so a heavy code of ancient errors would be chained upon mankind. Nor would the case be at all the better if by some freak of events the propounder of the new doctrine were to gain full control, and were to prohibit all he did not like. He would try, and try in vain, to make the inert mass of men accept or care for his new theory, and his particular enemy would be the careful critic who went with

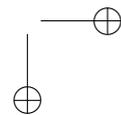
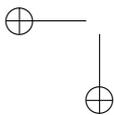


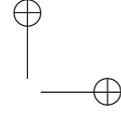
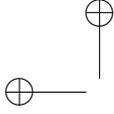


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him a little way and then refused to go any further. If you allow persecution, the partisans of the new sort of beauty will, if they can, attack those of the old sort; and the partisans of the old sort will attack those of the new sort; while both will turn on the quiet and discriminating person who is trying to select what is good from each. Some chance taste will be fixed for ages.

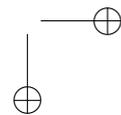
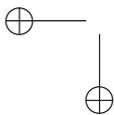
But it will be said, "Who ever heard of such nonsense as an esthetical persecution? Everybody knows such matters of taste must be left to take care of themselves; as far as they are concerned, nobody wants to persecute or prohibit." But I have spoken of matters of taste because it is sometimes best to speak in parables. The case of morals and religion, in which people have always persecuted and still wish to persecute, is the very same. If there are (as I myself think there are) ultimate truths of morals and religion which more or less vary for each mind, some sort of standard and some kind of agreement can only be arrived at about it in the very same way. The same comparison of one mind with another is necessary; the same discussion; the same use of criticising minds; the same use of original ones. The mode of arriving at truth is the same, and also the mode of stopping it.

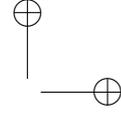
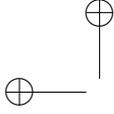




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We now see the reason why, as I said before, religious persecution often extirpates new doctrines, but commonly fails to maintain the belief in old tenets. You can prevent whole classes of men from hearing of the religion which is congenial to them, but you cannot make men believe a religion which is uncongenial. You can prevent the natural admirers of Gothic architecture from hearing anything of it, or from seeing it; but you cannot make them admire classical architecture. You may prevent the admirers of Claude from seeing his pictures, or from praising them; but you cannot make them admirers of Turner. Just so, you may by persecution prevent minds prone to be Protestant from being Protestant; but you will not make men real Catholics: you may prevent naturally Catholic minds from being Catholic; but you will not make them genuine Protestants. You will not make those believe your religion who are predisposed by nature in favour of a different kind of religion; you will make of them, instead, more or less conscious sceptics. Being denied the sort of religion of which the roots are in their minds and which they could believe, they will for ever be conscious of an indefinite want. They will constantly feel after something which they are never able to attain; they will never be able to



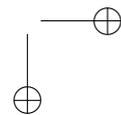
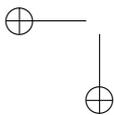


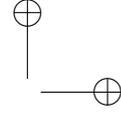
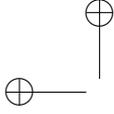
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settle upon anything; they will feel an instinctive repulsion from everything; they will be sceptics at heart, because they were denied the creed for which their heart craves; they will live as indifferentists, because they were withheld by force from the only creed to which they would not be indifferent. Persecution in intellectual countries produces a superficial conformity, but also underneath an intense, incessant, implacable doubt.

Upon examination, therefore, the admission that certain truths are not gained by discussion introduces no new element into the subject. The discussion of such truths is as necessary as of all other truths. The only limitations are that men's minds shall in the particular society be mature enough to bear the discussion, and that the discussion shall not destroy the society.

I acknowledge these two limitations to the doctrine that discussion should be free, but I do not admit another which is often urged. It is said that those who write against toleration should not be tolerated; that discussion should not aid the enemies of discussion. But why not? If there is a strong Government and a people fit for discussion, why should not the cause be heard? We must not assume that the liberty of discussion has no case of exception. We have



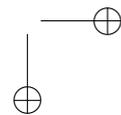
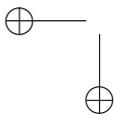


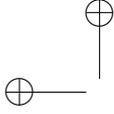
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just seen that there are, in fact, several such. In each instance, let the people decide whether the particular discussion shall go on or not. Very likely, in some cases, they may decide wrong; but it is better that they should so decide, than that we should venture to anticipate all experience, and to make sure that they cannot possibly be right.

It is plain, too, that the argument here applied to the toleration of opinion has no application to that of actions. The human mind in the cases supposed, learns by freely hearing all arguments, but in no case does it learn by trying freely all practices. Society, as we now have it, cannot exist at all unless certain acts are prohibited. It goes on much better because many other acts are prohibited also. The Government must take the responsibility of saying what actions it will allow; that is its first business, and the allowance of all would be the end of civilisation. But it must, under the conditions specified, hear all opinions, for the tranquil discussion of all more than anything else promotes the progressive knowledge of truth, which is the mainspring of civilisation.

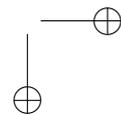
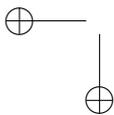
Nor does the argument that the law should not impose a penalty on the expression of any opinion equally prove that society should not in

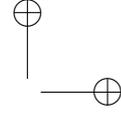
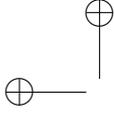




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many cases apply a penalty to that expression. Society can deal much more severely than the law with many kinds of acts, because it need be far less strict in the evidence it requires. It can take cognisance of matters of common repute and of things of which every one is sure, but which nobody can prove. Particularly, it can fairly well compare the character of the doctrine with the character of the agent, which law can do but imperfectly, if at all. And it is certain that opinions are evidence of the character of those who hold them – not conclusive evidence, but still presumptive. Experience shows that every opinion is compatible with what every one would admit to be a life fairly approvable, a life far higher than that of the mass of men. Great scepticism and great belief have both been found in characters whom both sceptics and believers must admire. Still, on the whole, there is a certain kinship between belief and character; those who disagree with a man's fundamental creed will generally disapprove of his habitual character. If, therefore, society sees a man maintaining opinions which by experience it has been led to connect with actions such as it discountenances, it is justified in provisionally discountenancing the man who holds those opinions. Such a man should be put to the proof to show by his life

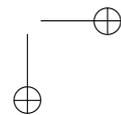
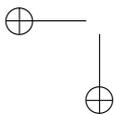


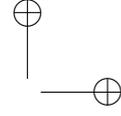
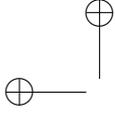


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that the opinions which he holds are not connected with really pernicious actions, as society thinks they are. If he is visibly leading a high life, society should discountenance him no longer; it is then clear that he did not lead a bad life, and the idea that he did or might lead such a life was the only reason for so doing. A doubt was suggested, but it also has been removed. This habit of suspicion does not, on the whole, impair free discussion; perhaps even it improves it. It keeps out the worst disputants, men of really bad character, whose opinions are the results of that character, and who refrain from publishing them, because they fear what society may say. If the law could similarly distinguish between good disputants and bad, it might usefully impose penalties on the bad. But, of course, this is impossible. Law cannot distinguish between the niceties of character; it must punish the publication of an opinion, if it punishes at all, no matter whether the publisher is a good man or whether he is a bad one. In such a matter, society is a discriminating agent: the law is but a blind one.

To most people I may seem to be slaying the slain, and proving what no one doubts. People, it will be said, no longer wish to persecute. But I say, they do wish to persecute. In fact, from





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their writings, and still better from their conversation, it is easy to see that very many believers would persecute sceptics, and that very many sceptics would persecute believers. Society may be wiser; but most earnest believers and most earnest unbelievers are not at all wiser.

