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APHORISMS

An Address

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BY

JOHN MORLEY

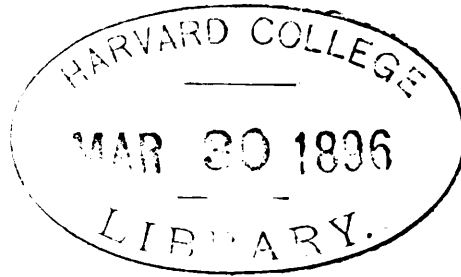
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John Dewey

APHORISMS

SINCE I accepted the honour of the invitation to deliver the opening address of your course, I have found no small difficulty in settling down on an appropriate subject. I half wrote a discourse on modern democracy,—how the rule of numbers is to be reconciled with the rule of sage judgment, and the passion for liberty and equality is to be reconciled with sovereign regard for law, authority, and order; and how our hopes for the future are to be linked to wise reverence for tradition and the past. But your secretary had emphatically warned me off all politics, and I feared that however carefully I might be on my guard against every reference to the burning questions of the hour, yet the clever

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eyes of political charity would be sure to spy out party innuendoes in the most innocent deliverances of purely abstract philosophy. Then for a day or two I lingered over a subject in a little personal incident. One Saturday night last summer I found myself dining with an illustrious statesman on the Welsh border, and on the Monday following I was seated under the acacias by the shore of the Lake of Geneva, where Gibbon, a hundred years ago almost to the day, had, according to his own famous words, laid down his pen after writing the last lines of his last page, and there under a serene sky, with the silver orb of the moon reflected from the waters, and amid the silence of nature, felt his joy at the completion of an immortal task, dashed by melancholy that he had taken everlasting leave of an old and agreeable companion. It was natural that I should meditate on the contrast that might be drawn between great literary performance and great political performance, between the making of history and the writing of it, — a contrast

containing matter enough not only for one, but for a whole series of edifying and instructive discourses. But there were difficulties here too, and the edifying discourse remains, like many another, incomplete.

So I am going to ask you after all to pass a tranquil hour with me in pondering a quiet chapter in the history of books. There is a loud cry in these days for clues that shall guide the plain man through the vast bewildering labyrinth of printed volumes. Everybody calls for hints what to read, and what to look out for in reading. Like all the rest of us, I have often been asked for a list of the hundred best books, and the other day a gentleman wrote to me to give him by return of post that far more difficult thing—a list of the three best books in the world. Both the hundred and the three are a task far too high for me; but perhaps you will let me try to indicate what, among so much else, is one of the things best worth hunting for in books, and one of the quarters of the library where you may

get on the scent. Though tranquil, it will be my fault if you find the hour dull, for this particular literary chapter concerns life, manners, society, conduct, human nature, our aims, our ideals, and all besides that is most animated and most interesting in man's busy chase after happiness and wisdom.

What is wisdom? That sovereign word, as has often been pointed out, is used for two different things. It may stand for knowledge, learning, science, systematic reasoning; or it may mean, as Coleridge has defined it, common sense in an uncommon degree; that is to say, the unsystematic truths that come to shrewd, penetrating, and observant minds, from their own experience of life and their daily commerce with the world, and that is called the wisdom of life, or the wisdom of the world, or the wisdom of time and the ages. The Greeks had two words for these two kinds of wisdom: one for the wise who scaled the heights of thought and knowledge; another for those who, without logical method, technical phraseology, or any of the parade

of the Schools, whether "Academics old and new, Cynic, Peripatetic, the sect Epicurean, or Stoic severe," held up the mirror to human nature, and took good counsel as to the ordering of character and of life.

Mill, in his little fragment on "Aphorisms," has said that in the first kind of wisdom every age in which science flourishes ought to surpass the ages that have gone before. In knowledge and methods of science each generation starts from the point at which its predecessor left off; but in the wisdom of life, in the maxims of good sense applied to public and to private conduct, there is, said Mill, a pretty nearly equal amount in all ages.

If this seem doubtful to any one, let him think how many of the shrewdest moralities of human nature are to be found in writings as ancient as the apocryphal Book of the Wisdom of Solomon and of Jesus the Son of Sirach; as Æsop's Fables; as the oracular sentences that are to be found in Homer and the Greek dramatists and orators; as

all that immense host of wise and pithy saws which, to the number of between four and five thousand, were collected from all ancient literature by the industry of Erasmus in his great folio of Adages. As we turn over these pages of old time, we almost feel that those are right who tell us that everything has been said, that the thing that has been is the thing that shall be, and there is no new thing under the sun. Even so, we are happily not bound to Schopenhauer's gloomy conclusion (*Werke*, v. 332), that "The wise men of all times have always said the same, and the fools, that is the immense majority, of all times, have always done the same, that is, to say the opposite of what the wise have said; and that is why Voltaire tells us that we shall leave this world just as stupid and as bad as we found it when we came here."

It is natural that this second kind of wisdom, being detached and unsystematic, should embody itself in the short and pregnant form of proverb, sentence, maxim, and

aphorism. // The essence of aphorism is the compression of a mass of thought and observation into a single saying. // It is the very opposite of dissertation and declamation; its distinction is not so much ingenuity as good sense brought to a point; it ought to be neither enigmatical nor flat, neither a truism on the one hand, nor a riddle on the other. These wise sayings, said Bacon, the author of some of the wisest of them, are not only for ornament, but for action and business, having a point or edge, whereby knots in business are pierced and discovered. And he applauds Cicero's description of such sayings as saltpits,—that you may extract salt out of them, and sprinkle it where you will. They are the guiding oracles which man has found out for himself in that great business of ours, of learning how to be, to do, to do without, and to depart. Their range extends from prudential kitchen maxims, such as Franklin set forth in the sayings of Poor Richard about thrift in time and money, up to such great and high moralities of life as are the prose

maxims of Goethe,—just as Bacon's Essays extend from precepts as to building and planting, up to solemn reflections on truth, death, and the vicissitudes of things. They cover the whole field of man as he is, and life as it is, not of either as they ought to be ; friendship, ambition, money, studies, business, public duty, in all their actual laws and conditions as they are, and not as the ideal moralist may wish that they were.

The substance of the wisdom of life must be commonplace, for the best of it is the result of the common experience of the world. Its most universal and important propositions must in a certain sense be truisms. The road has been so broadly trodden by the hosts who have travelled along it, that the main rules of the journey are clear enough, and we all know that the secret of breakdown and wreck is seldom so much an insufficient knowledge of the route as imperfect discipline of the will. The truism, however, and the commonplace may be stated in a form so fresh, pungent, and free from triviality, as to

have all the force of new discovery. Hence the need for a caution, that few maxims are to be taken without qualification. They seek sharpness of impression by excluding one side of the matter and exaggerating another, and most aphorisms are to be read as subject to all sorts of limits, conditions, and corrections.

It has been said that the order of our knowledge is this, that we know best, first, what we have divined by native instinct; second, what we have learned by experience of men and things; third, what we have learned not in books, but by books—that is, by the reflections that they suggest; fourth, last and lowest, what we have learned in books or with masters. The virtue of an aphorism comes under the third of these heads: it conveys a portion of a truth with such point as to set us thinking on what remains. Montaigne, who delighted in Plutarch, and kept him ever on his table, praises him in that besides his long discourses, “there are a thousand others,

which he has only touched and glanced upon, where he only points with his finger to direct us which way we may go if we will, and contents himself sometimes with only giving one brisk hit in the nicest article of the question, from whence we are to grope out the rest." And this is what Plutarch himself is driving at, when he warns young men that it is well to go for a light to another man's fire, but by no means to tarry by it, instead of kindling a torch of their own.

Grammarians draw a distinction between a maxim and an aphorism, and tell us that while an aphorism only states some broad truths of general bearing, a maxim, besides stating the truth, enjoins a rule of conduct as its consequence. For instance, to say that "There are some men with just imagination enough to spoil their judgment" is an aphorism. But there is action as well as thought in such sayings as this: "'Tis a great sign of mediocrity to be always reserved in praise"; or in this of M. Aurelius, "When thou wishest to give thyself delight, think of the excellences of

those who live with thee; for instance, of the energy of one, the modesty of another, the liberal kindness of a third." Again, according to this distinction of the word, we are to give the name of aphorism to Pascal's saying that "Most of the mischief in the world would never happen, if men would only be content to sit still in their parlours."¹ But we are to give the name of maxim to the great and admirable counsel of a philosopher of a very different school, that "If you would love mankind, you should not expect too much from them." *Heaven us*

But the distinction is one without much difference; we need not labour it nor pay it further attention. Aphorism or maxim, let us remember that this wisdom of life is the true salt of literature; that those books, at least in prose, are most nourishing which are most richly stored with it; and that it is one of the great objects, apart from the mere

¹ La Bruyère also says:—"All mischief comes from our not being able to be alone; hence play, luxury, dissipation, wine, ignorance, calumny, envy, forgetfulness of one's self and of God."

acquisition of knowledge, which men ought to seek in the reading of books.

A great living painter has said, that the longer he works, the more does he realise how very little anybody except the trained artist actually perceives in the natural objects constantly before him ; how blind men are to impressions of colour and light and form, which would be full of interest and delight, if people only knew how to see them. Are not most of us just as blind to the thousand lights and shades in the men and women around us? We live in the world as we live among fellow-inmates in a hotel, or fellow-revellers at a masquerade. Yet this, to bring knowledge of ourselves and others "home to our business and our bosoms," is one of the most important parts of culture.

Some prejudice is attached in generous minds to this wisdom of the world as being egotistical, poor, unimaginative, of the earth earthy. Since the great literary reaction at the end of the last century, men have been

apt to pitch criticism of life in the high poetic key. They have felt with Wordsworth :—

“ The human nature with which I felt
That I belonged and revered with love,
Was not a persistent presence, but a spirit
Diffused through time and space, with aid derived
Of evidence from monuments, erect,
Prostrate, or leaning towards their common rest
On earth, the widely-scattered wreck sublime
Of vanished nations.”

Then again, there is another cause for the passing eclipse of interest in wisdom of the world. Extraordinary advances have been made in ordered knowledge of the various stages of the long præ-historic dawn of human civilisation. The man of the flint implement and the fire-drill, who could only count up to five, and who was content to live in a hut like a bee-hive, has drawn interest away from the man of the market and the parlour. The literary passion for primitive times and the raw material of man has thrust polished man, the manufactured article, into a secondary place. All this is

in the order of things. It is fitting that we should pierce into the origins of human nature. It is right, too, that the great poets, the ideal interpreters of life, should be dearer to us than those who stop short with mere deciphering of what is real and actual. The poet has his own sphere of the beautiful and the sublime. But it is no less true that the enduring weight of historian, moralist, political orator, or preacher, depends on the amount of the wisdom of life that is hived in his pages. They may be admirable by virtue of other qualities, by learning, by grasp, by majesty of flight; but it is his moral sentences on mankind or the State, that rank the prose writer among the sages. These show that he has an eye for the great truths of action, for the permanent bearings of conduct, and for things that are for the guidance of all generations. What is it that makes Plutarch's Lives "the pasture of great souls," as they were called by one who was herself a great soul? Because his aim was much less to tell a story than, as he says,

“to decipher the man and his nature”; and in deciphering the man, to strike out many pregnant and fruitful thoughts on all men. Why was it worth while for Mr. Jowett, the other day, to give us a new translation of Thucydides’ history of the Peloponnesian War? and why is it worth your while, at least to dip in a serious spirit into its pages? Partly, because the gravity and concision of Thucydides are of specially wholesome example in these days of over-coloured and over-voluminous narrative; partly, because he knows how to invest the wreck and overthrow of those small states with the pathos and dignity of mighty imperial fall; but most of all, for the sake of the wise sentences that are sown with apt but not unsparing hand through the progress of the story. Well might Gray ask his friend whether Thucydides’ description of the final destruction of the Athenian host at Syracuse was not the finest thing he ever read in his life; and assuredly the man who can read that stern tale without admiration, pity, and awe, may

be certain that he has no taste for noble composition, and no feeling for the deepest tragedy of mortal things. But it is the sagacious sentences in the speeches of Athenians, Corinthians, Lacedæmonians, that do most of all to give to the historian his perpetuity of interest to every reader with the rudiments of a political instinct, and make Thucydides as modern as if he had written yesterday.

Tacitus belongs to a different class among the great writers of the world. He had, beyond almost any author of the front rank that has ever lived, the art of condensing his thought and driving it home to the mind of the reader with a flash. Beyond almost anybody, he suffered from what a famous writer of aphorisms in our time has described as "the cursed ambition to put a whole book into a page, a whole page into a phrase, and the phrase into a word." But the moral thought itself in Tacitus mostly belongs less to the practical wisdom of life, than to sombre poetic indignation, like that of Dante, against

the perversities of men and the blindness of fortune.

Horace's Epistles are a mine of genial, friendly, humane observation. Then there is none of the ancient moralists to whom the modern, from Montaigne, Charron, Raleigh, Bacon, downwards, owe more than to Seneca. Seneca has no spark of the kindly warmth of Horace; he has not the animation of Plutarch; he abounds too much in the artificial and extravagant paradoxes of the Stoics. But, for all that, he touches the great and eternal commonplaces of human occasion—friendship, health, bereavement, riches, poverty, death—with a hand that places him high among the wise masters of life. All through the ages men, tossed in the beating waves of circumstance, have found more in the essays and letters of Seneca than in any other secular writer, words of good counsel and comfort. And let this fact not pass, without notice of the light that it sheds on the great fact of the unity of literature, and of the absurdity of setting a wide gulf

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between ancient or classical literature and modern, as if under all dialects the partakers in Græco-Roman civilisation, whether in Athens, Rome, Paris, Weimar, Edinburgh, London, Dublin, were not the heirs of a great common stock of thought and speech.

I certainly do not mean anything so absurd as that the moralities, whether major or minor, whether affecting the foundation of conduct or the surface of manners, remain fixed. On the contrary, one of the most interesting things in literature is to mark the shifts and changes in men's standards. For instance, Boswell tells a curious story of the first occasion on which Johnson met Sir Joshua Reynolds. Two ladies of the company were regretting the death of a friend to whom they owed great obligations. Reynolds observed that they had at any rate the comfort of being relieved from a debt of gratitude. The ladies were naturally shocked at this singular alleviation of their grief, but Johnson defended it in his clear and forcible manner, and, says Boswell, "was much pleased with the

mind, the fair view of human nature, that it exhibited, like some of the reflections of Rochefoucauld." On the strength of it he went home with Reynolds, supped with him, and was his friend for life. No moralist with a reputation to lose would like to back Reynolds's remark in the nineteenth century.

Our own generation in Great Britain has been singularly unfortunate in the literature of aphorism. One too famous volume of proverbial philosophy had immense vogue, but it is so vapid, so wordy, so futile, as to have a place among the books that dispense with parody. Then, rather earlier in the century, a clergyman, who ruined himself by gambling, ran away from his debts to America, and at last blew his brains out, felt peculiarly qualified to lecture mankind on moral prudence. He wrote a little book in 1820, called *Lacon; or Many Things in Few Words, addressed to those who think*. It is an awful example to anybody who is tempted to try his hand at an aphorism. Thus, "Marriage is a feast where the grace

is sometimes better than the dinner." I had made some other extracts from this unhappy sage, but you will thank me for having thrown them into the fire. Finally, a great authoress of our time was urged by a friend to fill up a gap in our literature by composing a volume of "Thoughts": the result was that most insufferable of all deadly-lively prosings in our sublunary world, *Theophrastus Such*. One living writer of genius has given us a little sheaf of subtly-pointed maxims in the *Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, and perhaps he will one day divulge to the world the whole contents of Sir Austin Feverel's unpublished volume, *The Pilgrim's Scrip*.

Yet the wisdom of life has its full part in our literature. Keen insight into peculiarities of individual motive, and concentrated interest in the play of character, shine not merely in Shakespeare, whose mighty soul, as Hallam says, was saturated with moral observation, nor in the brilliant verse of Pope. For those who love meditative reading on the ways and destinies of men, we have Burton and Fuller

and Sir Thomas Browne in one age, and Addison, Johnson, and the rest of the Essayists, in another. Sir Thomas Overbury's *Characters*, written in the Baconian age, are found delightful by some; but for my own poor part, though I have striven to follow the critic's golden rule, to have preferences but no exclusions, Overbury has for me no savour. In the great art of painting moral portraits, or character-writing, the characters in Clarendon, or in Burnet's *History of His Own Time*, are full of life, vigour, and coherency, and are intensely attractive to read. I cannot agree with those who put either Clarendon or Burnet on a level with the characters in St. Simon or the Cardinal de Retz: there is a subtlety of analysis, a searching penetration, a breadth of moral comprehension, in the Frenchmen, which I do not find, nor, in truth, much desire to find, in our countrymen. A homelier hand does well enough for homelier men. Nevertheless, such characters as those of Falkland, or Chillingworth, by Clarendon, or Burnet's very different Lauderdale, are

worth a thousand battle-pieces, cabinet plots, or parliamentary combinations, of which we never can be sure that the narrator either knew or has told the whole story. It is true that these characters have not the strange quality which some one imputed to the writing of Tacitus, that it seems to put the reader himself and the secrets of his own heart into the confessional. It is in the novel that, in this country, the faculty of observing social man and his peculiarities has found its most popular instrument. The great novel, not of romance or adventure, but of character and manners, from the mighty Fielding, down, at a long interval, to Thackeray, covers the field that in France is held, and successfully held, against all comers, by her maxim writers, like La Rochefoucauld, and her character writers, like La Bruyère. But the literature of aphorism contains one English name of magnificent and immortal lustre—the name of Francis Bacon. Bacon's essays are the unique masterpiece in our literature of this oracular wisdom of life, applied

to the scattered occasions of men's existence. The Essays are known to all the world ; but there is another and perhaps a weightier performance of Bacon's which is less known, or not known at all, except to students here and there. I mean the second chapter of the 8th book of his famous treatise, *De Augmentis*. It has been translated into pithy English, and you will find it in the fifth volume of the great edition of Bacon, by Spedding and Ellis, which is doubtless in your library.

In this chapter, among other things, he composes comments on between thirty and forty of what he calls the Aphorisms or Proverbs of Solomon, which he truly describes as containing, besides those of a theological character, "not a few excellent civil precepts and cautions, springing from the inmost recesses of wisdom, and extending to much variety of occasions." I know not where else to find more of the salt of common sense in an uncommon degree than in Bacon's terse comments on the Wise King's terse sentences, and in the

keen, sagacious, shrewd wisdom of the world, lighted up by such brilliance of wit and affluence of illustration, in the pages that come after them.

This sort of wisdom was in the taste of the time; witness Raleigh's *Instructions to his Son*, and that curious collection "of political and polemical aphorisms grounded on authority and experience," which he called by the name of the *Cabinet Council*. Harrington's *Political Aphorisms*, which came a generation later, are not moral sentences; they are a string of propositions in political theory, breathing a noble spirit of liberty, though too abstract for practical guidance through the troubles of the day. But Bacon's admonitions have a depth and copiousness that are all his own. He says that the knowledge of advancement in life, though abundantly practised, had not been sufficiently handled in books, and so he here lays down the precepts for what he calls the *Architecture of Fortune*. They constitute the description of a man who is politic for

his own fortune, and show how he may best shape a character that will attain the ends of fortune.

First, A man should accustom his mind to judge of the proportion and value of all things as they conduce to his fortune and ends.

Second, Not to undertake things beyond his strength, nor to row against the stream.

Third, Not to wait for occasions always, but sometimes to challenge and induce them, according to that saying of Demosthenes: "In the same manner as it is a received principle that the general should lead the army, so should wise men lead affairs," causing things to be done which they think good, and not themselves waiting upon events.

Fourth, Not to take up anything which of necessity forestalls a great quantity of time, but to have this sound ever ringing in our ears: "Time is flying—time that can never be retrieved."

Fifth, Not to engage one's self too peremptorily in anything, but ever to have either

a window open to fly out at, or a secret way to retire by.

Sixth, To follow that ancient precept, not construed to any point of perfidiousness, but only to caution and moderation, that we are to treat our friend as if he might one day be a foe, and our foe as if he should one day be friend.

All these Bacon called the good arts, as distinguished from the evil arts which had been described years before by Machiavelli in his famous book *The Prince*, and also in his *Discourses*. Bacon called Machiavelli's sayings depraved and pernicious, and a corrupt wisdom, as indeed they are. He was conscious that his own maxims, too, stood in some need of elevation and of correction, for he winds up with wise warnings against being carried away by a whirlwind or tempest of ambition; by the general reminder that all things are vanity and vexation of spirit, and the particular reminder that, "Being without well-being is a curse, and the greater being, the greater

curse," and that "all virtue is most rewarded, and all wickedness most punished in itself"; by the question whether this incessant, restless, and, as it were, Sabbathless pursuit of fortune, leaves time for holier duties, and what advantage it is to have a face erected towards heaven, with a spirit perpetually grovelling upon earth, eating dust like a serpent; and finally, he says that it will not be amiss for men in this eager and excited chase of fortune, to cool themselves a little with that conceit of Charles V. in his instructions to his son, that "Fortune hath somewhat of the nature of a woman, who, if she be too closely wooed, is commonly the further off."

There is Baconian humour as well as a curious shrewdness in such an admonition as that which I will here transcribe, and there are many like it :—

"It is therefore no unimportant attribute of prudence in a man to be able to set forth to advantage before others, with grace and skill, his virtues, fortunes, and merits (which may be done without arrogance or breed-

ing disgust); and again, to cover artificially his weaknesses, defects, misfortunes, and disgraces; dwelling upon the former and turning them to the light, sliding from the latter or explaining them away by apt interpretations and the like. Tacitus says of Mucianus, the wisest and most active politician of his time, 'That he had a certain art of setting forth to advantage everything he said or did.' And it requires indeed some art, lest it become wearisome and contemptible; but yet it is true that ostentation, though carried to the first degree of vanity, is rather a vice in morals than in policy. For as it is said of calumny, 'Calumniate boldly, for some of it will stick,' so it may be said of ostentation (except it be in a ridiculous degree of deformity), 'Boldly sound your own praises, and some of them will stick.' It will stick with the more ignorant and the populace, though men of wisdom may smile at it; and the reputation won with many will amply countervail the disdain of a few. . . . And surely no small number of those who are of a solid nature, and who, from the want of this ventosity, cannot spread all sail in pursuit of their own honour, suffer some prejudice and lose dignity by their moderation."

Nobody need go to such writings as these for moral dignity or moral energy. They have no place in that nobler literature, from Epicurus and Marcus Aurelius downwards, which lights up the young soul with generous aims, and fires it with the love of all excellence.

Yet the most heroic cannot do without a dose of circumspection. The counsels of old Polonius to Laertes are less sublime than Hamlet's soliloquy, but they have their place. Bacon's chapters are a manual of circumspection, whether we choose to give to circumspection a high or a low rank in the list of virtues. Bacon knew of the famous city which had three gates, and on the first the horseman read inscribed, "Be bold;" and on the second gate yet again, "Be bold, and evermore be bold;" and on the third it was written, "Be not too bold."

This cautious tone had been brought about by the circumstances of the time. Government was strict; dissent from current opinions was dangerous; there was no indifference and hardly any tolerance; authority was suspicious and it was vindictive. When the great genius of Burke rose like a new sun into the sky, the times were happier, and nowhere in our literature does a noble prudence wear statelier robes than in the majestic compositions of Burke.

Those who are curious to follow the literature of aphorism into Germany, will, with the mighty exceptions of Goethe and Schiller, find but a parched and scanty harvest. They too often justify the unfriendly definition of an aphorism as a form of speech that wraps up something quite plain in words that turn it into something very obscure. As old Fuller says, the writers have a hair hanging to the nib of their pen. Their shortness does not prevent them from being tiresome. They recall the French wit to whom a friend showed a distich: "Excellent," he said; "but isn't it rather spun out?"

Lichtenberg, a professor of physics, who was also a considerable hand at satire a hundred years ago, composed a collection of sayings, not without some wheat amid much chaff. A later German writer, of whom I will speak in a moment or two, Schopenhauer, has some excellent remarks on Self-reflection, and on the difference between those who think for themselves and those

who think for other people ; between genuine Philosophers, who look at things first hand for their own sake, and Sophists, who look at words and books for the sake of making an appearance before the world, and seek their happiness in what they hope to get from others : he takes Herder for an example of the Sophist, and Lichtenberg for the true Philosopher. It is true that we hear the voice of the Self-thinker, and not the mere Book-philosopher, if we may use for once those uncouth compounds, in such sayings as these :—

“ People who never have any time are the people who do least.”

“ The utmost that a weak head can get out of experience, is an extra readiness to find out the weaknesses of other people.”

“ Over-anxiously to feel and think what one could have done, is the very worst thing one can do.”

“ He who has less than he desires, should know that he has more than he deserves.”

“ Enthusiasts without capacity are the really dangerous people.”

This last, by the way, recalls a saying of

the great French reactionary, De Bonald, which is never quite out of date: "Follies committed by the sensible, extravagances uttered by the clever, crimes perpetrated by the good,—there is what makes revolutions."

Radowitz was a Prussian soldier and statesman who died rather more than half a century ago, and left among many other things two or three volumes of short fragmentary pieces on politics, religion, literature, and art. They are intelligent and elevated, but contain hardly anything to our point to-night, unless it be this, that what is called Stupidity springs not at all from mere want of Understanding, but from the fact that the free use of a man's understanding is hindered by some definite vice: Frivolity, Envy, Dissipation, Covetousness, all these darling vices of fallen man,—these are at the bottom of what we name Stupidity. This is true enough, but it is not so much to the point as the saying of a highly judicious aphorist of my own acquaintance, that "Excessive anger against human

stupidity, is itself one of the most provoking of all forms of that stupidity.”

Another author of aphorisms of the Goethe period was Klinger, a playwright, who led a curious and varied life in camps and cities, who began with a vehement enthusiasm for the sentimentalism of Rousseau, and ended, as such men often end, with a hard and stubborn cynicism. He wrote *Thoughts on different Subjects of the World and Literature*, which are intelligent and masculine, if they are not particularly pungent in expression. One of them runs—“ He who will write interestingly must be able to keep heart and reason in close and friendliest connection. The heart must warm the reason, and reason must in turn blow on the embers if they are to burst into flame.” This illustrates what an aphorism should not be; contrast its clumsiness with the brevity of the famous and admirable French saying of Vauvenargues, that “ great thoughts come from the heart.”

Schopenhauer gave to one of his minor works the name of *Aphorismen zu Lebens-*

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Weisheit, Aphorisms for the Wisdom of Life, and he put to it by way of motto, Chamfort's saying, "Happiness is no easy matter; 'tis very hard to find it within ourselves, and impossible to find it anywhere else." Schopenhauer was so well read in European literature, he had such natural alertness of mind, and his style is so pointed, direct, and wide-awake, that these detached discussions are interesting and most readable; but for the most part discussions they are, and not aphorisms. Thus, in the saying that "The perfect man of the world should be he who never sticks fast in indecision, nor ever falls into overhaste," the force of it lies in what goes before and what follows after. The whole collection, winding up with the chapter of Counsels and Maxims, is in the main an unsystematic enforcement of those peculiar views of human happiness and its narrow limits which proved to be the most important part of Schopenhauer's system. "The sovereign rule in the wisdom of life," he said, "I see in Aristotle's proposition (*Eth. Nic.*

vii. 12), “ὁ φρόνιμος τὸ ἄλυπον διώκει οὐ τὸ ἡδύ: Not pleasure but freedom from pain is what the sensible man goes after.” The second volume, of Detached though systematically Ordered Thoughts on Various Circumstances, is miscellaneous in its range of topics, and is full of suggestion; but the thoughts are mainly philosophical and literary, and do not come very close to practical wisdom. In truth, so negative a view of happiness, such pale hopes and middling expectations, could not guide a man far on the path of active prudence, where we take for granted that the goal is really something substantial, serious, solid, and positive.¹

¹ Burke says on the point raised above: “I am satisfied that ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure. Without all doubt, the torments which we may be made to suffer are much greater in their effect on the body and mind than any pleasures which the most learned voluptuary could suggest. Nay, I am in great doubt whether any man could be found, who would earn a life of the most perfect satisfaction at the price of ending it in the torments which justice inflicted in a few hours on the late unfortunate regicide in France.”—(*Sublime and Beautiful*, sec. vii.) The reference is, of course, to Damiens.

Nobody cared less for the wisdom that is drawn from books, or has said such hard things of mere reading. In the short piece to which I have already referred (p. 30), he works out the difference between the Scholar who has read in books, and the Thinkers, the Geniuses, the Lights of the World, and Furtherers of the human race, who have read directly from the world's own pages. Reading, he says, is only a *succedaneum* for one's own thinking. Reading is thinking with a strange head instead of one's own. People who get their wisdom out of books are like those who have got their knowledge of a country from the descriptions of travellers. Truth that has been picked up from books only sticks to us like an artificial limb, or a false tooth, or a rhinoplastic nose ; the truth we have acquired by our own thinking is like the natural member. At least, as Goethe puts it in his verse,

Was du ererbt von deinen Vätern hast,
Erwirb es, um es zu besitzen.

*What from thy fathers thou dost inherit, be sure thou
earn it, that so it may be thine.*

It is only Goethe and Schiller, and especially Goethe, "the strong, much-toiling sage, with spirit free from mists, and sane and clear," who combine the higher and the lower wisdom, and have skill to put moral truths into forms of words that fix themselves with stings in the reader's mind. All Goethe's work, whether poetry or prose, his plays, his novels, his letters, his conversations, are richly bestrewn with the luminous sentences of a keen-eyed, steadfast, patient, indefatigable watcher of human life. He deals gravely and sincerely with men. He has none of that shallow irony by which small men who have got wrong with the world, seek a shabby revenge. He tells us the whole truth. He is not of those second-rate sages who keep their own secrets, externally complying with all the conventions of speech and demeanour, while privately nourishing unbridled freedom of opinion in the inner sanctuary of the mind. He handles soberly, faithfully, laboriously, cheerfully, every motive and all conduct. He marks himself the friend, the well-wisher, and

the helper. I will not begin to quote from Goethe, for I should never end. The volume of *Sprüche*, or aphorisms in rhyme and prose in his collected works, is accessible to everybody, but some of his wisest and finest are to be found in the plays, like the well-known one in his *Tasso*, "In stillness Talent forms itself, but Character in the great current of the world."

But here is a concentrated admonition from the volume that I have named, that will do as well as any other for an example of his temper :

"Wouldst thou fashion for thyself a seemly life?—
 Then fret not over what is past and gone ;
 And spite of all thou mayst have lost behind,
 Yet act as if thy life were just begun :
 What each day wills, enough for thee to know,
 What each day wills, the day itself will tell ;
 Do thine own task, and be therewith content ;
 What others do, that shalt thou fairly judge ;
 Be sure that thou no brother-mortal hate,
 Then all besides leave to the Master Power."

If any of you should be bitten with an unhappy passion for the composition of

aphorisms, let me warn such an one that the power of observing life is rare, the power of drawing new lessons from it is rarer still, and the power of condensing the lesson in a pointed sentence is rarest of all. Beware of cultivating this delicate art. The effort is only too likely to add one more to that perverse class described by Gibbon, who strangle a thought in the hope of strengthening it, and applaud their own skill, when they have shown in a few absurd words the fourth part of an idea. Let me warmly urge anybody with so mistaken an ambition, instead of painfully distilling poor platitudes of his own, to translate the shrewd saws of the wise-browed Goethe.

Some have found light in the sayings of Balthasar Gracian, a Spaniard, who flourished at the end of the seventeenth century, whose maxims were translated into English at the very beginning of the eighteenth, and who was introduced to the modern public in an excellent article by Sir M. E. Grant Duff a few years ago. The English title is attract-

ive,—*The Art of Prudence, or a Companion for a Man of Sense.* I do not myself find Gracian much of a companion, though some of his aphorisms give a neat turn to a commonplace. Thus :—

“The pillow is a dumb sibyl. To sleep upon a thing that is to be done, is better than to be wakened up by one already done.”

“To equal a predecessor one must have twice his worth.”

“What is easy ought to be entered upon as though it were difficult, and what is difficult as though it were easy.”

“Those things are generally best remembered which ought most to be forgot. Not seldom the surest remedy of the evil consists in forgetting it.”

It is France that excels in the form no less than in the matter of aphorism, and for the good reason that in France the arts of polished society were relatively at an early date the objects of a serious and deliberate cultivation, which was and perhaps is unknown in the rest of Europe. Conversation became a fine art. “I hate war,” said one; “it spoils conversation.” The leisured

classes found their keenest relish in delicate irony, in piquancy, in contained vivacity, in the study of niceties of observation and finish of phrase. You have a picture of it in such a play as Molière's *Misanthropist*, where we see a section of the polished life of the time—men and women making and receiving compliments, discoursing on affairs with easy lightness, flitting backwards and forwards with a thousand petty hurries, and among them one singular figure, hoarse, rough, sombre, moving with a chilling reality in the midst of frolicking shadows. But the shadows were all in all to one another. Not a point of conduct, not a subtlety of social motive, escaped detection and remark.

Dugald Stewart has pointed to the richness of the French tongue in appropriate and discriminating expressions for varieties of intellectual turn and shade. How many of us, who claim to a reasonable knowledge of French, will undertake easily to find English equivalents for such distinctions as are

expressed in the following phrases—*Esprit juste, esprit étendu, esprit fin, esprit délié, esprit de lumière.* These numerous distinctions are the evidence, as Stewart says, of the attention paid by the cultivated classes to delicate shades of mind and feeling. Compare with them the colloquial use of our overworked word “clever.” Society and conversation have never been among us the school of reflection, the spring of literary inspiration, that they have been in France. The English rule has rather been like that of the ancient Persians, that the great thing is to learn to ride, to shoot with the bow, and to speak the truth. There is much in it. But it has been more favourable to strength than to either subtlety or finish.

One of the most commonly known of all books of maxims, after the *Proverbs of Solomon*, is the *Moral Reflections of La Rochefoucauld*. The author lived at court, himself practised all the virtues which he seemed to disparage, and took so much trouble to make sure of the right expression that

many of these short sentences were more than thirty times revised. They were given to the world in the last half of the seventeenth century in a little volume which Frenchmen used to know by heart, which gave a new turn to the literary taste of the nation, and which has been translated into every civilised tongue. It paints men as they would be if self-love were the one great mainspring of human action, and it makes magnanimity itself no better than self-interest in disguise.

“Interest,” he says, “speaks all sorts of tongues and plays all sorts of parts, even the part of the disinterested.”

“Gratitude is with most people only a strong desire for greater benefits to come.”

“Love of justice is with most of us nothing but the fear of suffering injustice.”

“Friendship is only a reciprocal conciliation of interests, a mutual exchange of good offices; it is a species of commerce out of which self-love always intends to make something.”

“We have all strength enough to endure the troubles of other people.”

“Our repentance is not so much regret for the ill we have done, as fear of the ill that may come to us in consequence.”

And everybody here knows the saying that "In the adversity of our best friends we often find something that is not exactly displeasing."

We cannot wonder that in spite of their piquancy of form, such sentences as these have aroused in many minds an invincible repugnance for what would be so tremendous a calumny on human nature, if the book were meant to be a picture of human nature as a whole. I count Rochefoucauld's *Maxims*, says one critic, "a bad book. As I am reading it, I feel discomfort; I have a sense of suffering which I cannot define. Such thoughts tarnish the brightness of the soul; they degrade the heart."

Yet as a faithful presentation of human selfishness, and of you and me in so far as we happen to be mainly selfish, the odious mirror has its uses by showing us what manner of man we are or may become. Let us not forget either that not quite all is selfishness in La Rochefoucauld. Everybody knows his saying that hypocrisy is the homage that vice pays to virtue. There is a

subtle truth in this, that to be in too great a hurry to discharge an obligation is itself a kind of ingratitude. Nor is there any harm in the reflection that no fool is so troublesome as the clever fool; or in this, that only great men have any business with great defects; or, finally, in this, that we are never either so happy or so unhappy as we imagine.

No more important name is associated with the literature of aphorism than that of Pascal; but the Thoughts of Pascal concern the deeper things of speculative philosophy and religion, rather than the wisdom of daily life, and, besides, though aphoristic in form, they are in substance systematic. "I blame equally," he said, "those who take sides for praising man, those who are for blaming him, and those who amuse themselves with him: the only wise part is search for truth—search with many sighs." On man, as he exists in society, he said little; and what he said does not make us hopeful. He saw the darker side. "If everybody knew what

one says of the other, there would not be four friends left in the world.” “Would you have men think well of you, then do not speak well of yourself.” And so forth. If you wish to know Pascal’s theory you may find it set out in brilliant verse in the opening lines of the second book of Pope’s *Essay on Man*. “What a chimera is Man,” said Pascal. “What a confused chaos! What a subject of contradiction! A professed judge of all things, and yet a feeble worm of the earth; the great depository and guardian of truth, and yet a mere huddle of uncertainty; the glory and the scandal of the universe.” Shakespeare was wiser and deeper when, under this quintessence of dust, he discerned what a piece of work is man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and moving how express and admirable. This serene and radiant faith is the secret, added to matchless gifts of imagination and music, why Shakespeare is the greatest of men.

There is a smart, spurious wisdom of the

world which has the bitterness not of the salutary tonic but of mortal poison ; and of this kind the master is Chamfort, who lived through the French Revolution, and whose little volume of thoughts is often extremely witty, always pointed, but not seldom cynical and false. “If you live among men,” he said, “the heart must either break or turn to brass.” “The public, the public,” he cried ; “how many fools does it take to make a public !” “What is celebrity ? The advantage of being known to people who don’t know you.”

All literatures might be ransacked in vain for a more repulsive saying than this, that “A man must swallow a toad every morning if he wishes to be quite sure of finding nothing more disgusting still for the rest of the day.” We cannot be surprised to hear of the lady who said that a conversation with Chamfort in the morning made her melancholy until bedtime. Yet Chamfort is the author of the not unwholesome saying that, “The most wasted of all days is that on

which one has not laughed." One of his maxims lets us into the secret of his misanthropy. "Whoever," he said, "is not a misanthropist at forty, can never have loved mankind." It is easy to know what this means. Of course if a man is so superfine that he will not love mankind any longer than he can believe them to be demigods and angels, it is true that at forty he may have discovered that they are neither. Beginning by looking for men to be more perfect than they can be, he ends by thinking them worse than they are, and then he secretly plumes himself on his superior cleverness in having found humanity out. For the deadliest of all wet blankets give me a middle-aged man who has been most of a visionary in his youth.

To correct all this, let us recall the saying that I have already quoted, which made so deep an impression on Jeremy Bentham: "In order to love mankind we must not expect too much from them." And let us remember that Archbishop Fénelon, one of

the most saintly men that ever lived, and whose very countenance bore such a mark of goodness that when he was in a room men found they could not desist from looking at him, wrote to a friend the year before he died, "I ask little from most men; I try to render them much, and to expect nothing in return, and I get very well out of the bargain."

Chamfort I will leave, with his sensible distinction between Pride and Vanity. "A man," he says, "has advanced far in the study of morals who has mastered the difference between pride and vanity. The first is lofty, calm, immovable; the second is uncertain, capricious, unquiet. The one adds to a man's stature; the other only puffs him out. The one is the source of a thousand virtues; the other is that of nearly all vices and all perversities. There is a kind of pride in which are included all the commandments of God; and a kind of vanity which contains the seven mortal sins."

I will say little of La Bruyère, by far

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the greatest, broadest, strongest, of French character-writers, because his is not one of the houses of which you can judge by a brick or two taken at random. For those in whom the excitements of modern literature have not burnt up the faculty of sober meditation on social man, La Bruyère must always be one of the foremost names. Macaulay somewhere calls him thin. But Macaulay has less ethical depth, and less perception of ethical depth, than any writer that ever lived with equally brilliant gifts in other ways; and *thin* is the very last word that describes this admirable master. If one seeks to measure how far removed the great classic moralists are from thinness, let him turn from La Bruyère to the inane subtleties and meaningless conundrums, not worth answering, that do duty for analysis of character in some modern American literature. We feel that La Bruyère, though retiring, studious, meditative, and self-contained, has complied with the essential condition of looking at life and men themselves, and with

his own eyes. His aphoristic sayings are the least important part of him, but here are one or two examples :—

“Eminent posts make great men greater, and little men less.”

“There is in some men a certain mediocrity of mind that helps to make them wise.”

“The flatterer has not a sufficiently good opinion either of himself or of others.”

“People from the provinces and fools are always ready to take offence, and to suppose that you are laughing at them: we should never risk a pleasantry, except with well-bred people, and people with brains.”

“All confidence is dangerous, unless it is complete: there are few circumstances in which it is not best either to hide all or to tell all.”

“When the people is in a state of agitation, we do not see how quiet is to return; and when it is tranquil, we do not see how the quiet is to be disturbed.”

“Men count for almost nothing the virtues of the heart, and idolise gifts of body or intellect. The man who quite coolly, and with no idea that he is offending modesty, says that he is kind-hearted, constant, faithful, sincere, fair, grateful, would not dare to say that he is quick and clever, that he has fine teeth and a delicate skin.”

I will say nothing of Rivarol, a caustic wit of the revolutionary time, nor of Joubert, a writer of sayings of this century, of whom

Mr. Matthew Arnold has said all that needs saying. He is delicate, refined, acute, but his thoughts were fostered in the hothouse of a coterie, and have none of the salt and sapid flavour that comes to more masculine spirits from active contact with the world.

I should prefer to close this survey in the sunnier moral climate of Vauvenargues. His own life was a pathetic failure in all the aims of outer circumstance. The chances of fortune and of health persistently balked him, but from each stroke he rose up again, with undimmed serenity and undaunted spirit. As blow fell upon blow, the sufferer held firmly to his incessant lesson, Be brave, persevere in the fight, struggle on, do not let go, think magnanimously of man and life, for man is good and life is affluent and fruitful. He died 140 years ago, leaving a little body of maxims behind him which, for tenderness, equanimity, cheerfulness, grace, sobriety, and hope, are not surpassed in prose literature. "One of the noblest qualities in our nature," he said, "is that we

are able so easily to dispense with greater perfection.”

“Magnanimity owes no account to prudence of its motives.”

“To do great things a man must live as though he had never to die.”

“The first days of spring have less grace than the growing virtue of a young man.”

“You must rouse in men a consciousness of their own prudence and strength if you would raise their character.”

Just as Tocqueville said: “He who despises mankind will never get the best out of either others or himself.”¹

The best known of Vauvenargues' sayings, as it is the deepest and the broadest, is the far-reaching sentence already quoted, that “Great thoughts come from the heart.” And this is the truth that shines out as we watch the voyagings of humanity from the “wide, grey, lampless depths” of time. Those have been greatest in thought who

¹ The reader who cares to know more about Vauvenargues will find a chapter on him in the present writer's *Miscellanies*, vol. ii.

have been best endowed with faith, hope, sympathy, and the spirit of effort. And next to them come the great stern, mournful men, like Tacitus, Dante, Pascal, who, standing as far aloof from the soft poetic dejection of some of the moods of Shelley or Keats, as from the savage fury of Swift, watch with a prophet's indignation the heedless waste of faculty and opportunity, the triumph of paltry motive and paltry aim, as if we were the flies of a summer noon, which do more than any active malignity to distort the great lines, and to weaken or to frustrate the strong and healthy parts, of human nature. For practical purposes all these complaints of man are of as little avail as Johnson found the complaint that of the globe so large a space should be occupied by the uninhabitable ocean, encumbered by naked mountains, lost under barren sands, scorched by perpetual heat or petrified by perpetual frost, and so small a space be left for the production of fruits, the pasture of cattle, and the accommodation of men.

When we have deducted, said Johnson, all the time that is absorbed in sleep, or appropriated to the other demands of nature, or the inevitable requirements of social intercourse, all that is torn from us by violence of disease, or imperceptibly stolen from us by languor, we may realise of how small a portion of our time we are truly masters. And the same consideration of the ceaseless and natural præ-occupations of men in the daily struggle, will reconcile the wise man to all the disappointments, delays, shortcomings of the world, without shaking the firmness of his own faith, or the intrepidity of his own purpose.

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