

For the Torch of Reason.

The Relativity of Knowledge.

BY B. F. UNDERWOOD.

Anybody who attempts to study philosophy without understanding the fact of the "relativity of knowledge" with its profound implications, will land in the ditch.

Human knowledge is relative. Perception and resultant conception are products of two factors—consciousness and the objective reality. What either is "in itself" we do not and can not know. The two factors constitute a synthesis which is the basis of all knowledge.

What the world is except in relation to consciousness we do not know. What consciousness is except in relation to what is perceived, and what is conceived as objective, we do not know. Our world is the perceptive and the conceptive world. What the world is except in relation to consciousness is "unknowable".

The so-called properties of matter are, in final analysis, states of mind. No philosophy which disputes or ignores this philosophical proposition has any standing in court.

Phenomena are facts of consciousness. What, in co-operation with consciousness, gives rise to the perception and conception of things objective, we do not know, because perception and conception are products of the objective and subjective factors.

We know color only as a sensation; we know vibrations of ether only as a conception.

Phenomena are APPEARANCES, the "show of things"; the effects of the external something upon the sentient organism.

Some years ago Prof. T. B. Wakeman, in an excellent address before the Free Religious Association, presented this thought very clearly, and I think his judicious words now reproduced, since he belongs to the faculty of the Liberal University, will be read with interest by the readers of the Torch, and with his permission they are herewith presented:

"As to the first question, What is the Religion of Humanity? if I should give a short, concrete definition, it would be simply this: It is the SUBJECTIVE SYNTHESIS. If you ask further explanation of this term, I would translate a little aphorism of Goethe, perhaps the wisest of men, which may help to show what depth of meaning lurks under this philosophic phrase. The words of Goethe are: "We know of no world but in relation to man; we wish and will no art except as an expression of that relation."

If you ask further for an explanation of this aphorism, I must refer you to its foundation, which is none other than the fundamental law of all modern science and philosophy—the great culminating product of all the ages of thought and experience—"the law of the relativity of human knowledge." Many

of you will remember how Sir William Hamilton, and after him Herbert Spencer, have collected into a grand galaxy of honor to the human race the names of those who, from Protagoras and Aristotle down to Kant and Comte, have done so much to illustrate and to make ever clearer the "gradually growing" conception of that doctrine. Since the time of Kant—Hamilton, Mill, Spencer, Huxley, Bain, and indeed all of those who have had any lead or influence in general scientific thought, have one after another made stronger and more irrefragable the conviction that this philosophical doctrine is a law of science underlying all human knowledge, thought and effort.

Now under the light of this law what is the meaning of Goethe's aphorism? The meaning is, that we only know this world about us as it is related to us; that we know only phenomena. We know our perceptions of things, and call them the world. What the world may be beyond its relation to us, and our perceptions of it, we have neither the capacity nor the means for learning. The consequences of this conclusion are of the greatest importance in regard to the subject before us. It is this conclusion that points to MAN as the connecting mind by which all phenomena are construed together. The nucleus MAN is the center around which the knowable world hangs, to which it all comes; for it is the human perceptive power by which all phenomena are co-ordinated into THE WHOLE, as a world.

The importance of this latter proposition calls for a fuller consideration. We must take this law of relativity for granted as the foundation of all knowable science and philosophy, and, if the Religion of Humanity follows from it, we shall have no alternative but to recognize the fact and to conform to it. That those who have established this law have failed to deduce or to verify all its consequences, is only to say that they discovered a larger continent than they were able to explore, and that they left that work to their successors.

As the fundamental fact, then, we know the world about us only as phenomena, that is, only as it appears to us. We have only our, i. e., a human, conception of its properties and relations.

The primary or permanent, as well as the secondary or transient properties of matter, and also time and space—that is, succession and extension—upon final analysis, are found to be modes of our sensation and apprehension."

COMMENT BY T. B. W.

Mr. Underwood has done the Liberal world another service by insistence upon the "Relativity of Knowledge" and its consequences. We are pleased that he recognizes how thoroughly this was done as the basis of every phase of Science and Humanism in the address entitled "The Religion of Humanity", delivered before the Free Religious Association, at Boston, May 31, 1878, O. B. Frothingham presiding; and by after remarks heartily approving of the same. We intend to reprint that address, but now we can only add the paragraphs which immediately follow and complete

the quotation made by Mr. Underwood, and which show that the world as HUMANITY is able to know and has learned to know it, is the only possible world to man, and the basis of all of his life, present and future. A more fruitful, important and interesting chapter, as Mr. Underwood intimates, has never been given than the grand human conclusions which follow from this "Relativity of Knowledge". Other of its inevitable consequences will appear in another column.

We continue the quotation thus:

"The growth of Scientific Philosophy has in this way been a continuous victory of the EXPERIENTIAL Philosophy, and a confirmation of the maxim,—

'Nihil in intellectu non prius in sensu.'

That is, "Nothing in the intellect that has not first been in sensation". But the greatest of these triumphs has been the reply of Sociology to the objection Leibnitz made to this maxim when he retorted, as is said, "with the applause of Europe", 'Nisi intellectus ipsi [Except the intellect itself]!'—the point of the objection being, that the intellect itself was prior to or independent of experience, and had forms and capacities of thought and even necessary truths which transcended all experience. The answer to this has come from the light that Social Science and Comparative Psychology have thrown upon the genesis and history of the human mind and its conceptions. Whatever of these appeared inexplicable from the study of the individual, or of one stage of civilization, yields to the historical vision that studies the whole human race as 'one grand individual' growing through the ages, and retaining by unconscious heredity the results of the various stages of its progress. In his contact and struggle with his environment, Man has carried away in his inmost and instinctive nature much that we can find no origin for now, unless we look deeply and broadly into what we may call the embryology of the race.

Take, for instance, the explanation of the CONSCIENCE, or moral sense. It seemed at first wholly inexplicable, and therefore, of course, a divine intuition, or faculty of supernatural origin. But this was so only from its individual and partial examination. Under the historical analysis of Spencer, Darwin, Tylor and Fiske, its origin from the natural selection and heredity of the Altruistic feelings, that is, those beneficial to society, is made out as plainly as the physiological origin and evolution of the human eye or hand. In a word, there seems to be nothing in the individual man, physically, mentally, morally, or even spiritually, that does not become intelligible under this RACE-EXPLANATION when thoroughly applied.

The next step is to inquire how the questions of human existence appear under this law of relativity supplemented by natural selection and race-heredity. The answer from the law of relativity must be that man is capable of knowing the world ONLY according to the experience of his race. The collective, continuous humanity is, therefore, the first and main factor, the nominative case, or subject, in any thorough attempt to parse or under-

stand the world in which we live. The verb "is", or existence itself, is the activity or experience of this subject, and the world around us, is the object, knowable as the accumulated results of MAN'S experience. This is the ground of our faith, hope and meliorism.

But it follows that man's explanation of the world can never be more than his own explanation. His philosophy, therefore, is HIS SUBJECTIVE SYNTHESIS, and can never truly be more until he can learn to think beyond relations, as a bird would fly without wings or air. Our science is our human reading and co-ordination of phenomena as they appear to us. The center of all the sciences can, therefore, be no other than this continuous Man which remains as the subject, the very and only nucleus of the knowable Cosmos, which he arranges in order around him, as he perceives it and needs and wills it. All the sciences, that is, all laws and relations, center in him and are knowable only as his sensations, thoughts and feelings. In this grand continuous organism, HUMANITY, we, therefore, find the convergence of the external world, AS FAR AS WE CAN KNOW IT, under the law of the relativity of human knowledge.

But if this is true of the material and biological worlds, it is, if possible, more decisively true and important in the domain of human societies and of moral endeavor. For this continuous human organism, now embracing our planet, has gradually incorporated into its continuity and solidarity the past ages and all of the present peoples and nations. It has become a grand unity, being first united emotionally in the sentiment of the HUMANE; then by commerce, religion and international law, until now it distinctly aims at the conscious control of itself, and of the earth under the reign of law. It is the great organism, the GREATEST BEING known to us. From it we have come, and have received all that we have inherited or acquired, and in it we literally "live, and move and have our being".

Under the light of such considerations the deeper meaning of Goethe's aphorism dawns upon us. If we ask now, What is the Religion of Humanity? This law of the relativity of human knowledge answers, that it is THE SUM of all the relations and emotions, infinite, cosmic and human, that converge in MAN as the center of the whole knowable world. These relations are theoretically known and summed up in the word "Science", and practically, emotionally and morally in the word "Duty". "TO KNOW THE TRUE in order to do THE GOOD", is, therefore, the fundamental maxim of the New Faith.

Its creed is SCIENCE, or the Positive Philosophy, formed by co-ordinating the special sciences in the order in which the forces are correlated through the material world as they pass from the infinite space through the domains which constitute astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, sociology, up to the individual man himself. Thus the order of the sciences builds a philosophy that binds the Cosmos into one intelligible WHOLE lying around its great perceptive center, MAN. Its religious and moral base is this organic Humanity, whose good, welfare and glory become the main-spring of life and duty. Its future heaven is the knowable, realizable