

SELF-EDUCATION.

THE common opinion seems to be that Self-education is distinguished by nothing but the manner of its acquisition. It is thought to denote simply acquisitions made without a teacher, or at all events without oral instruction—advantages always comprehended in the ordinary course of instruction. But this merely negative circumstance, however important, falls far short of giving a full view of the subject; it is only one of several particulars equally characteristic of self-education as contrasted with the popular system. Besides the absence of many, or of all the usual facilities for learning, there are at least three things peculiar to this enterprise, namely, the longer time required, the wider range of studies, and the higher character of its objects.

Our schools claim only a few years; they graduate students after a comparatively limited time, and never again exact lessons from them. It is not so with the *Alma Mater* of the self-educated; she claims life as the term of study and gives instruction to the last.

The course of study in our best literary institutions is far from including all that might profit the student. Reference is always had to the brevity of the period to which his acquisitions must be confined; and as a consequence many branches of science, which under other circumstances would have had a place in the list of studies, are necessarily excluded. Self-education, by bringing into requisition the whole of our available time, provides for an enlargement of the course of study. Its plan is commensurate with human ability, and exceeds the popular standard by all that the mind is capable of acquiring beyond the task imposed upon it at school.

In the schools, as at present constituted, all acquisitions are confined to pre-established science. No provision is made to enlarge the boundaries of knowledge, nor is there any ambition to do more than fairly understand what others have written. This is an unavoidable trait of such institutions; it is impossible to infuse into them a spirit of invention and discovery without weakening too much that reverence for authority, on which their dignity depends. Schools are organized solely for the diffusion of knowledge, not for its improvement.—

Their highest object is to tread undeviatingly in the beaten path of science, without once entertaining those perplexing questions which address themselves to such as are engaged in original inquiries. But the limits of self-education are far from being thus restricted. In addition to cultivating an acquaintance with the attainments of former scholars, the student is expected to extend his researches to new departments of knowledge. The known and the unknown are equally legitimate objects of pursuit; they are both embraced in the same comprehensive design, and thus united constitute a task worthy of the intellectual faculties.

Now, although all these co-ordinate points of distinction are necessary to a complete survey of this subject, yet we do not wish it to be understood that the question is not one of much consequence, even when considered as involving nothing but the mode of attainment. Let the schools be taken as the standard and it becomes desirable to know whether the knowledge they communicate can be obtained by other means. If it cannot, then we are obliged to admit, as a principle in mental philosophy, that the powers of the mind are measurably dependent upon these institutions. This being the case, those who are shut out from such advantages must of necessity acquiesce in an inferior scholarship.—Considered in this light alone the question is one of more than ordinary interest. It is, however, only by advancing to the other peculiarities which have been mentioned that we can perceive the true dignity of self-education. Its means, its plans, its objects, to be fully appreciated must be compared with the more circumscribed scheme of popular education. Regarded in this connection it no longer appears doubtful and imperfect—a questionable substitute for scholastic facilities; but it assumes an elevation which the artificial system can at best feebly approximate. It becomes the great method—the exclusive method of improving science; and it opens to the mind the only field sufficiently extensive for the exertion of its abilities. Certainly, in this view, the correctness of which cannot be disputed, we may justly say with a late writer, that “The subject is one of immense importance.—