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"The Theory of 'useful' Education."

Paper read by the Rev. H. BELCHER, M. A., before the college of Preceptors.

1. In speaking of "useful" Education, I do not entertain the question discussed by Mental Science—What the "useful" is. The sense in which this word is employed by some writers on Mental Philosophy—that is, to mean, and to embrace in its meaning, whatever conduces to happiness—is not the sense Lord Palmerston's oracle, the Man in the street, puts upon the word. Mr. Stuart Mill has eloquently, in his famous Essay, expressed the highest views of the useful; but the Man in the street means, by the Useful, a commodity quickly convertible into money. He understands a useful education to be the cheapest and quickest acquisition of knowledge that can be turned without trouble to the service of trade. And if his view be admissible, the educational difficulty is solved: and Mr. Herbert Spencer's conclusion is correct:—

"If men are to be mere cits, mere porers over ledgers, with no ideas beyond their trades: if it is well that they should be as the Cockney, whose conception of rural pleasures extends no further than sitting in the tea-garden smoking pipes and drinking porter; or as the squire, who thinks of woods as places for shooting

in, of uncultivated plants as nothing but weeds, and who classifies animals into game, vermin, and stock,—then indeed it is needless to learn anything that does not directly help to replenish the till and fill the larder."—*Essays in Education*, p. 78.

This work of Mr. Spencer's is remarkable both for the extreme forcibleness of his expressions, and for a large ignorance of education as it actually exists. For instance, he thinks that, in giving a boy a classical education, we are endeavouring to conform simply to public opinion (p. 2). That a lady learns Italian and German that she may be able to sing ballads in those languages, and command whispered admiration (p. 3). That History is taught in our schools as a mere tissue of names and dates and dead unmeaning events (p. 11).

Or again, that our education will make men careless of the architecture of the heavens, yet anxious in some miserable controversy about Mary Queen of Scots—or learnedly critical over a Greek Ode, yet pass by without a glance the grand Epic written by the finger of God upon the strata of the earth. These and similar misapprehensions of things as they are, disfigure the book, which embodies a popular enquiry into what useful education signifies.

But while he concludes in favour of experimental or natural science, as the highest vehicle of sound education, there is one aspect of the question he refuses, it would seem, to discuss.

Of commercial education—instruction in Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic—he says nothing. Accurately speaking, there is nothing to discuss. The most furious despot, it has been said, fails to tyrannize over the multiplication table; a Claudius could not succeed in forcing a new alphabet on his subjects. And it is within the safe limits of the alphabet and multiplication that the lowest forms of instruction contain themselves.

There is no room for opinion in these matters. To be the master of the three R's is no special credit—but to fail in the three R's is a very special disgrace. To argue about their usefulness, is like, in an argument, whether clothes ought to be decorative preferably or comfortable