

The Foundations of Knowledge.

MR. BALFOUR'S book, "The Foundations of Belief," bids fair to prove an epoch-making book. The distinguished ability and honorable position of the author, and his facile, polished, and pungent style, combine with the perennial and almost agonizing human interest in the question he discusses, to turn the popular mind with unusual seriousness to a subject upon which men have never been able to stop thinking. The caption of this note is broader than Mr. Balfour's theme, embracing much more than the grounds of that "belief" which is only one form of knowledge, or one road to knowledge.

At the bottom of all other philosophy is the philosophy of knowledge—*gnosis* or epistemology, or (in German) *Erkenntnisstheorie*, as it is technically called. The discussion of it has given rise to dogmatism, skepticism, mysticism, agnosticism, and the related theories, and led in later times to such monumental works as Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Mansell's *Limits of Religious Thought*, and the like. This is the burning question just now. Is knowledge possible? If so, what can I know? The possibilities and the limitations of knowledge are being everywhere discussed—oftenest, perhaps, by those who have least possible qualifications for the discussion. What with the big words, the bewildering technicalities, and the smoke and din of the battle, it is almost impossible for the average man to do anything more than agree to the assumptions of the boldest assumer, or accept the assertions of the loudest assertor. Failure to do clear, distinct, comprehensive thinking just here is, however, failure on the part of the scholar and preacher to lay that sure foundation, without which essays and discussions and sermons will be incoherent and so far confusing. Such failure must leave one liable to be "carried about with every wind of doctrine." We have space for only a point or two in this connection, with some words of suggestion and future reference.

Is knowledge possible? That is the basal question. Before one can even enter upon its consideration, the *possibility*, nay the *actuality* of knowledge must be assumed; unless, indeed, one is to be content with the intellectual feat analogous to the physical feat of the idiot dancing about his own shadow and wondering which is reality, or whether either is such. The agnostic, equally with the gnostic and the merognostic, must make his assumptions in starting out to construct his system of philosophy or knowledge. Now, what are the *principles* that must necessarily be assumed, if we are to do our knowing and thinking in accordance with the laws of our nature and environment? False philosophy on this subject comes from departures from the true principles, or from unwarranted and unscientific assumptions. What we want is a stable and *natural* philosophy.

Not even the first step can be taken without assuming that *man's faculties of sense and reason*—when in normal condition and legitimately used—*are trustworthy*. We need not go so far back as they do who insist that the Maker would not have so made our so-called powers of knowledge as to "put us to permanent intellectual confusion." The simple fact is that without that postulate there can be no such thing as knowing.

What is it to *know*? In strict sense, to know is to perceive or apprehend with the

mind, and to have assurance, by proper evidence, that our mental perception or apprehension corresponds with the reality or object represented. The ground of certainty in knowledge is *evidence*, and the degree of certainty depends upon the kind and character of the evidence. Now, evidence, in the wide sense, embraces—(1) self-evidence, as that of axioms, intuitive truths, and immediate knowledges by the senses and consciousness; (2) demonstrative evidence, as that of necessary deductions from established truths; (3) probable or moral evidence, which in various degrees falls short of demonstration, as that from the ordinary processes of observation and thought, or that from authority or testimony.

The first and necessary assumption is that the human faculties are to be trusted, and that the evidence of fact or truth they furnish in any case is to be accepted for precisely what it is worth. Any one who lays firm hold upon these simple principles has assured himself of the right starting-point. Empiricism, skepticism, agnosticism, naturalism, all start out with assuming that the human faculties are more or less mendacious, and that the evidence with which they furnish us is to be either largely discounted or wholly rejected.

To apply this to Mr. Balfour's thinking and philosophy: Mr. Balfour's first notable book—which has some very remarkable presentations of vital and fundamental truths—"A Defence of Philosophic Doubt," was originally entitled "A Defence of Philosophic Skepticism." It is an *ad hominem* argument against naturalism. Assuming the postulate of the naturalist, that knowledge is confined to phenomena and is uncertain at that, the philosopher replies: "Very well, my philosophy rests on precisely the same basis as your science. If I know nothing, you know nothing. We are in the same boat." The argument is crushing from the point of view taken; but what satisfaction is there in such a conclusion? "You are in a leaky boat! You are going to the bottom!" "You too!" That is the substance of it. But we do not want to go to the bottom!

Mr. Balfour opens his latest book with the same destructive argument, brilliantly and victoriously pressed to a conclusion. Unfortunately, in so doing, he often quite passes over into the camp of the naturalist, and with him discredits the human *faculty of sense*, at the same time showing himself to be only an amateur in the philosophy of knowledge, and becoming a helper of the agnostic. Further on in his discussion he casts like discredit upon the human *faculty of reason*, and deals with the origin and causes of belief and knowledge rather than with the *grounds*. What we want to know is not—Whence does this or that belief or knowledge come? nor, What causes it? but What is the real ground for it, by reason of which we have a right to hold it, and to hold it against all comers? Mr. Balfour thus discredits also the evidence furnished by the human faculties as the basis of certainty in knowledge, and leaves both philosophy and science with no assured foundation.

All the flings of the philosophers at man's senses as unconscionable liars become proofs of their ignorance, or their superficiality, the instant we grasp the distinction—made so plain by President McCosh and others, and emphasized practically for a generation by St. George Mivart and many other men of like thinking—between "original perceptions" and "acquired perceptions," and lay hold upon a few other simple principles.

We think the clearest and ablest discussions of these points will be found in the works of Mivart.