

we have no need to start with the presumption that they are probably false. Most of our convictions, especially our practical principles of life, are probably true in the main. But, when we come to the thoughtful consideration of any subject which we are required to investigate, we must start with this conviction, that our previous judgments must be either verified or abandoned. If they are true, then the most searching examination will only confirm them. We must at least bring them face to face with acknowledged facts, sincerely, earnestly, honestly, or as honestly as we can. If they are compatible with the facts and harmonize with them, it is well. We shall return to them with fresh confidence, with deeper conviction. If they are incompatible with the facts, if our opinions and undeniable facts cannot stand together, then our opinions must undergo change or modification.

(2) A second hindrance to the formation of right opinions—and one which is closely connected with our prejudices—is found in our *interests*.

It is hardly possible for a man to consider any subject, especially one of a practical character, without asking, or having the question forced upon him, how it will affect himself. We may go further and say that such a consideration will bias him without being consciously present with him at all.

The operation of this principle is often remarked in the presence of any proposed change in the laws of the land. By whom are such changes ordinarily—we say not always—opposed? Naturally enough by those whose interests are really apparently assailed. It is said that the English clergy, as a class, opposed the abolition of the corn laws, because they feared it would lead to the reduction of their tithes. And it is quite possible that the clergy, like

other men, did not wish their incomes to be diminished. It is said that the innkeepers throughout the country were opposed to the early closing of their houses, as being at variance with their interests. It has been asserted that the Coventry weavers were in favour of free trade in everything but ribbons.

This subject might be illustrated in a thousand ways. It is very hard indeed for a man to take an impartial view of the public interest in a matter by which his own private interest is affected. And yet it is only as we can rise above these personal considerations that our judgments have any real value, that we can have any reliance upon the accuracy of our opinions. It is only as we care for truth, and believe that it is better than error, even if the error should happen for a time to benefit ourselves; that our opinions are likely to be true opinions.

(3) Another great hindrance to right opinion is *party feeling*. It is generally believed to be the strongest and the most baneful of all. Some think that there is nothing so cruel and unscrupulous as party feeling, when it gains thorough dominion over a man. Mr. Ruskin says,* “Men associate in parties only by sacrificing their opinions, or by having none worth sacrificing; and the effect of party government is always to develop hostilities and hypocrisies, and to extinguish ideas.”

On the other hand, it is asserted that the government of a country could not be carried on without party organization. Party, it is said, is organized opinion, and, if you believe that it is for the good of the community that you should give effect by your opinions, you must organize for this purpose. In other words, you must act in parties.

* Fors Clavigera, No. 1, p. 7.