

what seems likely and reasonable to one age seems unlikely and even impossible to another.

"In this perplexity men have looked for general laws which may underlie the multitude of phenomena. The botanist who would understand the nature of a orchid need not dissect every specimen that he can find. He examines a few, discovers in these certain uniform features, and learns the principle of their structure. Some such general principle philosophers have hoped to find in the history of mankind.

"Many hypotheses have been advanced and many will be advanced. A theory is started. It is received perhaps with enthusiasm, and gloried in as a scientific discovery. The misfortune is that it is of such short continuance. Each generation in these clever days likes to make its own philosophy. In a few years it is superseded by something else, and that again, if one lives long enough, by another. Old men who have witnessed two or three such experiences grow shy and sceptical, and refuse to listen to any more.

"In my own youth, when Bishop Butler was an authority, we were taught that we lived under a providential dispensation of which we knew very little. The probable interpretation of our position was, however, that we were in a state of probation; that our life in this world was a school for the training of character, with a view to some ulterior purpose. This purpose was not explained to us, but we had a rule of conduct in our consciences which experience in the long run uniformly sanctioned. Nations and individuals had the same responsibilities. Those who were frugal, brave, pure, honest, and industrious, were internally happy and outwardly prosperous. Those who followed pleasure, power, wealth, or luxury,

were brought to account one way or another, and made to know that they had missed the road.

"Such an explanation of things has been too old-fashioned for modern speculation. For myself, I consider that it is still the most reasonable which has yet been offered. History, so far as history has anything to say about it, does teach that right and wrong are real distinctions. In the shape of a law I can discern nothing else.

"It may be said that we know this already. If history proves only this, we need not waste time over it.

"So a Political Economist asked once what the *Iliad* proved; and indeed it is hard to say what the *Iliad* does prove, except the truth of the French proverb, 'Cherchez la femme,' when there is mischief about. Yet the *Iliad* has for 3000 years been the best educator of mankind—Greek and Roman, Frank and German, Celt and Saxon, have learnt there, more than anywhere, to admire and love what is brave and beautiful, and to despise what is cowardly and base.

"The great poem of human history, if read in the same way, may have the same value for us; and if it has, we need not ask for more. All depends on what human life means. Assume any purpose which suits your inclination; you will easily find evidence for it.

"Voltaire conceived that the world was being made into a tolerable place of residence for a set of mortals who might or might not have any further destination. He insisted in the *Essai sur les Mœurs*, that from original darkness there had been a gradual spread of intelligence—that manners have softened with knowledge—and that the process might be expected to continue. That in fact the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life are really the same.