Chapter XII

The Office and Limitations of the Reason

If the reason is not the sovereign master of our being nor even intended to be more than an intermediary or minister, it cannot succeed in giving a perfect law to the other estates of the realm, although it may impose on them a temporary and imperfect order as a passage to a higher perfection. The rational or intellectual man is not the last and highest ideal of manhood, nor would a rational society be the last and highest expression of the possibilities of an aggregate human life,—unless indeed we give to this word, reason, a wider meaning than it now possesses and include in it the combined wisdom of all our powers of knowledge, those which stand below and above the understanding and logical mind as well as this strictly rational part of our nature. The Spirit that manifests itself in man and dominates secretly the phases of his development, is greater and profounder than his intellect and drives towards a perfection that cannot be shut in by the arbitrary constructions of the human reason.

Meanwhile, the intellect performs its function; it leads man to the gates of a greater self-consciousness and places him with unbandaged eyes on that wide threshold where a more luminous Angel has to take him by the hand. It takes first the lower powers of his existence, each absorbed in its own urge, each striving with a blind self-sufficiency towards the fulfilment of its own instincts and primary impulses; it teaches them to understand themselves and to look through the reflecting eyes of the intelligence on the laws of their own action. It enables them to discern intelligently the high in themselves from the low, the pure from the impure and out of a crude confusion to arrive at more and more luminous formulas of their possibilities. It gives
them self-knowledge and is a guide, teacher, purifier, liberator. For it enables them also to look beyond themselves and at each other and to draw upon each other for fresh motives and a richer working. It strengthens and purifies the hedonistic and the aesthetic activities and softens their quarrel with the ethical mind and instinct; it gives them solidity and seriousness, brings them to the support of the practical and dynamic powers and allies them more closely to the strong actualities of life. It sweetens the ethical will by infusing into it psychic, hedonistic and aesthetic elements and ennobles by all these separately or together the practical, dynamic and utilitarian temperament of the human being. At the same time it plays the part of a judge and legislator, seeks to fix rules, provide systems and regularised combinations which shall enable the powers of the human soul to walk by a settled path and act according to a sure law, an ascertained measure and in a balanced rhythm. Here it finds after a time that its legislative action becomes a force for limitation and turns into a bondage and that the regularised system which it has imposed in the interests of order and conservation becomes a cause of petrifaction and the sealing up of the fountains of life. It has to bring in its own saving faculty of doubt. Under the impulse of the intelligence warned by the obscure revolt of the oppressed springs of life, ethics, aesthetics, the social, political, economic rule begin to question themselves and, if this at first brings in again some confusion, disorder and uncertainty, yet it awakens new movements of imagination, insight, self-knowledge and self-realisation by which old systems and formulas are transformed or disappear, new experiments are made and in the end larger potentialities and combinations are brought into play. By this double action of the intelligence, affirming and imposing what it has seen and again in due season questioning what has been accomplished in order to make a new affirmation, fixing a rule and order and liberating from rule and order, the progress of the race is assured, however uncertain may seem its steps and stages.

But the action of the intelligence is not only turned downward and outward upon our subjective and external life to
understand it and determine the law and order of its present movement and its future potentialities. It has also an upward and inward eye and a more luminous functioning by which it accepts divinations from the hidden eternities. It is opened in this power of vision to a Truth above it from which it derives, however imperfectly and as from behind a veil, an indirect knowledge of the universal principles of our existence and its possibilities; it receives and turns what it can seize of them into intellectual forms and these provide us with large governing ideas by which our efforts can be shaped and around which they can be concentrated or massed; it defines the ideals which we seek to accomplish. It provides us with the great ideas that are forces (idées forces), ideas which in their own strength impose themselves upon our life and compel it into their moulds. Only the forms we give these ideas are intellectual; they themselves descend from a plane of truth of being where knowledge and force are one, the idea and the power of self-fulfilment in the idea are inseparable. Unfortunately, when translated into the forms of our intelligence which acts only by a separating and combining analysis and synthesis and into the effort of our life which advances by a sort of experimental and empirical seeking, these powers become disparate and conflicting ideals which we have all the difficulty in the world to bring into any kind of satisfactory harmony. Such are the primary principles of liberty and order, good, beauty and truth, the ideal of power and the ideal of love, individualism and collectivism, self-denial and self-fulfilment and a hundred others. In each sphere of human life, in each part of our being and our action the intellect presents us with the opposition of a number of such master ideas and such conflicting principles. It finds each to be a truth to which something essential in our being responds,—in our higher nature a law, in our lower nature an instinct. It seeks to fulfil each in turn, builds a system of action round it and goes from one to the other and back again to what it has left. Or it tries to combine them but is contented with none of the combinations it has made because none brings about their perfect reconciliation or their satisfied oneness. That indeed
belongs to a larger and higher consciousness, not yet attained by mankind, where these opposites are ever harmonised and even unified because in their origin they are eternally one. But still every enlarged attempt of the intelligence thus dealing with our inner and outer life increases the width and wealth of our nature, opens it to larger possibilities of self-knowledge and self-realisation and brings us nearer to our awakening into that greater consciousness.

The individual and social progress of man has been thus a double movement of self-illumination and self-harmonising with the intelligence and the intelligent will as the intermediaries between his soul and its works. He has had to bring out numberless possibilities of self-understanding, self-mastery, self-formation out of his first crude life of instincts and impulses; he has been constantly impelled to convert that lower animal or half-animal existence with its imperfect self-consciousness into the stuff of intelligent being, instincts into ideas, impulses into ordered movements of an intelligent will. But as he has to proceed out of ignorance into knowledge by a slow labour of self-recognition and mastery of his surroundings and his material and as his intelligence is incapable of seizing comprehensively the whole of himself in knowledge, unable to work out comprehensively the mass of his possibilities in action, he has had to proceed piecemeal, by partial experiments, by creation of different types, by a constant swinging backward and forward between the various possibilities before him and the different elements he has to harmonise.

It is not only that he has to contrive continually some new harmony between the various elements of his being, physical, vitalistic, practical and dynamic, aesthetic, emotional and hedonistic, ethical, intellectual, but each of them again has to arrive at some order of its own disparate materials. In his ethics he is divided by different moral tendencies, justice and charity, self-help and altruism, self-increase and self-abnegation, the tendencies of strength and the tendencies of love, the moral rule of activism and the moral rule of quietism. His emotions are necessary to his development and their indulgence essential
to the outflowering of his rich humanity; yet is he constantly called upon to coerce and deny them, nor is there any sure rule to guide him in the perplexity of this twofold need. His hedonistic impulse is called many ways by different fields, objects, ideals of self-satisfaction. His aesthetic enjoyment, his aesthetic creation forms for itself under the stress of the intelligence different laws and forms; each seeks to impose itself as the best and the standard, yet each, if its claim were allowed, would by its unjust victory impoverish and imprison his faculty and his felicity in its exercise. His politics and society are a series of adventures and experiments among various possibilities of autocracy, monarchism, military aristocracy, mercantile oligarchy, open or veiled plutocracy, pseudo-democracy of various kinds, bourgeois or proletarian, individualistic or collectivist or bureaucratic, socialism awaiting him, anarchism looming beyond it; and all these correspond to some truth of his social being, some need of his complex social nature, some instinct or force in it which demands that form for its effectuation. Mankind works out these difficulties under the stress of the spirit within it by throwing out a constant variation of types, types of character and temperament, types of practical activity, aesthetic creation, polity, society, ethical order, intellectual system, which vary from the pure to the mixed, from the simple harmony to the complex; each and all of these are so many experiments of individual and collective self-formation in the light of a progressive and increasing knowledge. That knowledge is governed by a number of conflicting ideas and ideals around which these experiments group themselves: each of them is gradually pushed as far as possible in its purity and again mixed and combined as much as possible with others so that there may be a more complex form and an enriched action. Each type has to be broken in turn to yield place to new types and each combination has to give way to the possibility of a new combination. Through it all there is growing an accumulating stock of self-experience and self-actualisation of which the ordinary man accepts some current formulation conventionally as if it were an absolute law and truth,—often enough he even thinks it to be that,—but
which the more developed human being seeks always either to break or to enlarge and make more profound or subtle in order to increase or make room for an increase of human capacity, perfectibility, happiness.

This view of human life and of the process of our development, to which subjectivism readily leads us, gives us a truer vision of the place of the intellect in the human movement. We have seen that the intellect has a double working, dispassionate and interested, self-centred or subservient to movements not its own. The one is a disinterested pursuit of truth for the sake of Truth and of knowledge for the sake of Knowledge without any ulterior motive, with every consideration put away except the rule of keeping the eye on the object, on the fact under enquiry and finding out its truth, its process, its law. The other is coloured by the passion for practice, the desire to govern life by the truth discovered or the fascination of an idea which we labour to establish as the sovereign law of our life and action. We have seen indeed that this is the superiority of reason over the other faculties of man that it is not confined to a separate absorbed action of its own, but plays upon all the others, discovers their law and truth, makes its discoveries serviceable to them and even in pursuing its own bent and end serves also their ends and arrives at a catholic utility. Man in fact does not live for knowledge alone; life in its widest sense is his principal preoccupation and he seeks knowledge for its utility to life much more than for the pure pleasure of acquiring knowledge. But it is precisely in this putting of knowledge at the service of life that the human intellect falls into that confusion and imperfection which pursues all human action. So long as we pursue knowledge for its own sake, there is nothing to be said: the reason is performing its natural function; it is exercising securely its highest right. In the work of the philosopher, the scientist, the savant labouring to add something to the stock of our ascertainable knowledge, there is as perfect a purity and satisfaction as in that of the poet and artist creating forms of beauty for the aesthetic delight of the race. Whatever individual error and limitation there may be, does not matter; for the collective and progressive knowledge of
the race has gained the truth that has been discovered and may be trusted in time to get rid of the error. It is when it tries to apply ideas to life that the human intellect stumbles and finds itself at fault.

Ordinarily, this is because in concerning itself with action the intelligence of man becomes at once partial and passionate and makes itself the servant of something other than the pure truth. But even if the intellect keeps itself as impartial and disinterested as possible,—and altogether impartial, altogether disinterested the human intellect cannot be unless it is content to arrive at an entire divorce from practice or a sort of large but ineffective tolerantism, eclecticism or sceptical curiosity,—still the truths it discovers or the ideas it promulgates become, the moment they are applied to life, the plaything of forces over which the reason has little control. Science pursuing its cold and even way has made discoveries which have served on one side a practical humanitarianism, on the other supplied monstrous weapons to egoism and mutual destruction; it has made possible a gigantic efficiency of organisation which has been used on one side for the economic and social amelioration of the nations and on the other for turning each into a colossal battering-ram of aggression, ruin and slaughter. It has given rise on the one side to a large rationalistic and altruistic humanitarianism, on the other it has justified a godless egoism, vitalism, vulgar will to power and success. It has drawn mankind together and given it a new hope and at the same time crushed it with the burden of a monstrous commercialism. Nor is this due, as is so often asserted, to its divorce from religion or to any lack of idealism. Idealistic philosophy has been equally at the service of the powers of good and evil and provided an intellectual conviction both for reaction and for progress. Organised religion itself has often enough in the past hounded men to crime and massacre and justified obscurantism and oppression.

The truth is that upon which we are now insisting, that reason is in its nature an imperfect light with a large but still restricted mission and that once it applies itself to life and action it becomes subject to what it studies and the servant and
counsellor of the forces in whose obscure and ill-understood struggle it intervenes. It can in its nature be used and has always been used to justify any idea, theory of life, system of society or government, ideal of individual or collective action to which the will of man attaches itself for the moment or through the centuries. In philosophy it gives equally good reasons for monism and pluralism or for any halting-place between them, for the belief in Being or for the belief in Becoming, for optimism and pessimism, for activism and quietism. It can justify the most mystic religionism and the most positive atheism, get rid of God or see nothing else. In aesthetics it supplies the basis equally for classicism and romanticism, for an idealistic, religious or mystic theory of art or for the most earthy realism. It can with equal power base austerely a strict and narrow moralism or prove triumphantly the thesis of the antinomian. It has been the sufficient and convincing prophet of every kind of autocracy or oligarchy and of every species of democracy; it supplies excellent and satisfying reasons for competitive individualism and equally excellent and satisfying reasons for communism or against communism and for State socialism or for one variety of socialism against another. It can place itself with equal effectivity at the service of utilitarianism, economism, hedonism, aestheticism, sensualism, ethicism, idealism or any other essential need or activity of man and build around it a philosophy, a political and social system, a theory of conduct and life. Ask it not to lean to one idea alone, but to make an eclectic combination or a synthetic harmony and it will satisfy you; only, there being any number of possible combinations or harmonies, it will equally well justify the one or the other and set up or throw down any one of them according as the spirit in man is attracted to or withdraws from it. For it is really that which decides and the reason is only a brilliant servant and minister of this veiled and secret sovereign.

This truth is hidden from the rationalist because he is supported by two constant articles of faith, first that his own reason is right and the reason of others who differ from him is wrong, and secondly that whatever may be the present deficiencies of
the human intellect, the collective human reason will eventually arrive at purity and be able to found human thought and life securely on a clear rational basis entirely satisfying to the intelligence. His first article of faith is no doubt the common expression of our egoism and arrogant fallibility, but it is also something more; it expresses this truth that it is the legitimate function of the reason to justify to man his action and his hope and the faith that is in him and to give him that idea and knowledge, however restricted, and that dynamic conviction, however narrow and intolerant, which he needs in order that he may live, act and grow in the highest light available to him. The reason cannot grasp all truth in its embrace because truth is too infinite for it; but still it does grasp the something of it which we immediately need, and its insufficiency does not detract from the value of its work, but is rather the measure of its value. For man is not intended to grasp the whole truth of his being at once, but to move towards it through a succession of experiences and a constant, though not by any means a perfectly continuous self-enlargement. The first business of reason then is to justify and enlighten to him his various experiences and to give him faith and conviction in holding on to his self-enlargings. It justifies to him now this, now that, the experience of the moment, the receding light of the past, the half-seen vision of the future. Its inconstancy, its divisibility against itself, its power of sustaining opposite views are the whole secret of its value. It would not do indeed for it to support too conflicting views in the same individual, except at moments of awakening and transition, but in the collective body of men and in the successions of Time that is its whole business. For so man moves towards the infinity of the Truth by the experience of its variety; so his reason helps him to build, change, destroy what he has built and prepare a new construction, in a word, to progress, grow, enlarge himself in his self-knowledge and world-knowledge and their works.

The second article of faith of the believer in reason is also an error and yet contains a truth. The reason cannot arrive at any final truth because it can neither get to the root of things nor embrace the totality of their secrets; it deals with the finite,
the separate, the limited aggregate, and has no measure for the all and the infinite. Nor can reason found a perfect life for man or a perfect society. A purely rational human life would be a life baulked and deprived of its most powerful dynamic sources; it would be a substitution of the minister for the sovereign. A purely rational society could not come into being and, if it could be born, either could not live or would sterilise and petrify human existence. The root powers of human life, its intimate causes are below, irrational, and they are above, suprarational. But this is true that by constant enlargement, purification, openness the reason of man is bound to arrive at an intelligent sense even of that which is hidden from it, a power of passive, yet sympathetic reflection of the Light that surpasses it. Its limit is reached, its function is finished when it can say to man, “There is a Soul, a Self, a God in the world and in man who works concealed and all is his self-concealing and gradual self-unfolding. His minister I have been, slowly to unseal your eyes, remove the thick integuments of your vision until there is only my own luminous veil between you and him. Remove that and make the soul of man one in fact and nature with this Divine; then you will know yourself, discover the highest and widest law of your being, become the possessors or at least the receivers and instruments of a higher will and knowledge than mine and lay hold at last on the true secret and the whole sense of a human and yet divine living.”