

1850

Review of An Oration, Delivered Before the Two Societies of the South-Carolina College

N. Beverley Tucker

Repository Citation

Tucker, N. Beverley, "Review of An Oration, Delivered Before the Two Societies of the South-Carolina College" (1850). *Faculty Publications*. 1328.

<https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/facpubs/1328>

Copyright c 1850 by the authors. This article is brought to you by the William & Mary Law School Scholarship Repository.

<https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/facpubs>

ART. III.—*An Oration, delivered before the two Societies of the South-Carolina College, on the 4th of December, 1849.* By JAMES H. HAMMOND, a member of the Euphradian Society. Charleston: Walker and James. 1850.

WE have read this little pamphlet with great pleasure, and we hope not without profit. We knew too much of the author to expect to find it filled with the vapid common places, and stereotyped pedantry, which too often characterize such productions. But we were not prepared to see even him take so lofty a stand, from whence, glancing over the whole field of Philosophy, he might point the boundaries and characteristics of its several provinces. The pupil of no particular school, his aim seems to have been to deal impartially with the merits and defects of all, and to bring together, from all sources, ancient and modern, thoughts calculated to enlarge the

mind and elevate the purposes of life, and, at the same time, such as will bear the test of manly practical common sense. Appealing to no sordid or selfish motives of action, the discourse is calculated to cheer and inspirit the mind in the pursuit of true wisdom, and to stimulate the faculties to the fulfilment of man's mission: to inspire him "with thoughts beyond the limit of his frame:" to exalt

"His generous aim to all diviner deeds:
To chase each partial purpose from his breast;
And through the mists of passion and of sense,
And through the hoping tide of chance and pain
To urge his course unflinching."

We are thankful to General Hammond for the notice he has bestowed on a kind of pedants, who are always prating about the "Baconian Philosophy," the "inductive system," the "analytical method," the "*experimentum crucis*," and the "*Novum Organum*." To say nothing of the disgust with which we listen to men who do but repeat what they have heard others say, we are impatient of being told that the world was near six thousand years old, before men learned to reason. We are no schoolmen; but we have heard that Aristotle and Socrates had a gift in that way, and that many truths, which do not lie upon the surface, and which no man has ventured to question after subjecting them to all the tests of "analytical methods," were discovered some centuries before the Christian era. We have always inclined to the belief, that, from the beginning of the world, all men have been thinking, as at this day, each according to the measure of his capacity, just as every man, according to the strength of his stomach, digests his food. We suspect, that both processes are carried on by the spontaneous action of the appropriate faculties and organs, and both much the better for not being liable to be controlled or regulated by the will. We do not think that the health of any man's body is promoted by always thinking about his stomach, and we suppose that the advance toward true wisdom is rarely hastened by any like attention to the intellect. If any effect is produced by this superintendence of the processes of nature, it will probably be to increase the number of flatulent valetudinarians, full of wind and crotchets, instead of roast-beef and common sense.

We have often met with men of eager and envious

minds, who, not having had the advantage of education, and being denied the means of accurate knowledge, exercise their faculties in a way quite satisfactory to themselves, but by no means conducive to the advancement of philosophical truth. They begin by guessing, and then from their scanty and inaccurate information, cull out such facts as may seem to favor their foregone conclusion. Such men are apt to be wise in their own eyes, and in the eyes of others no better informed, who are in the way of being infected with their crude notions. How many of those the world calls the Philosophers of antiquity were precisely in this condition! With their limited means of knowledge, there were but few subjects in regard to which they could do more than guess in the first instance; and then, having dignified their guesses with the name of "philosophical tests," they went on to magnify such few facts as they could get hold of, into presumptions, and coin proofs of the correctness of their conjectures. This they did, because it was all they could do. It was not so much that they did not know how to reason, as that they had not, and could not obtain, the necessary data. Socrates alone had the sobriety and unpretending simplicity of mind and character to see the insufficiency of his data, and to declare that all his knowledge was "that he knew nothing." This saying alone is proof enough that he himself belonged to the Baconian school, and that, with the means of knowledge since vouchsafed to us, he would have reasoned as accurately as any disciple of that school could wish. It was not his fault that he could not *experiment* on the *nature of God*, the great problem that occupied his mind. That other minds in his day, wrought by accurate methods is proved by the unimpeachable correctness of their reasoning in Mathematics, the only science the axioms of which belong to all time, and are equally in the reach of all men every where. In that exact science men were not long in finding out, that, however, by knowing three of the six parts of a triangle, they could calculate the rest, yet the knowledge of two only could lead to no conclusion. They knew, as well as Lord Bacon himself, that, before they could begin to reason, they must resort to *experiment*, that is to mensuration, to get a third. Their misfortune was, that, in other sciences, it was not so easy to ascertain the number and quality of the necessary data, that the means of getting at them

were limited, and that the subjects which they most desired to investigate were too interesting to be dismissed from their thoughts, even when convinced that certainty was unattainable. They had nothing left for it but to muse—to dream—to conjecture, and, at last, to persuade themselves that the probabilities in favor of what they desired to believe amounted to proof. Hence they learned to look into their own minds, and to seize upon their impulses, their desires themselves, as facts to reason from, in support of desired conclusions. This led to the ideal school. "The desire of immortality," said Plato, "proves the soul to be immortal." It was a grand thought, the offspring of other and grander thoughts. It implied a previous conviction of the existence and goodness of God; of his interest in his creatures, and his purpose "not to leave himself without a witness" in their hearts. Hence they insisted that this "longing after immortality" was implanted by him as the only means, without direct revelation, of giving man to know himself to be immortal. It awakened a wonder that such revelation had not been made—a hope that God would some day reveal himself, and thus prepared the mind to expect a revelation and to believe it when made.

That altar at Athens "to the *unknown God!*" did it not import that they who erected it knew that the idols they bowed down to, in the eager cravings of the heart after a god to worship, were not gods; and that the only living and true God was not known to them? Even so said St. Paul. "The world, by wisdom, knew not God;" and *this truth* the *Baconians* of Athens had found out. They had ascertained the insufficiency of their data to determine the character of the Creator, and the nature of the case admitted of no *experimentum crucis*, or any other sort of experiment to supply the defect. They saw that reasoning was vain, and they ceased to reason, but they could still feed their hungry minds with speculation, and console themselves with the idea, that if they did not know God, it was because God had chosen not to make himself known to them. To us, it seems that it is precisely here that Lord Bacon himself would have rested.

But, though they had no means of making the much desired experiment, it was made for them, and it was literally the *experimentum crucis*. Armed with this, the Apostle was prepared to say to them, "whom therefore

ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you." "Life and immortality are now brought to light," and God revealed himself to be just the being that Socrates had worshipped, in fancy and in hope, and that all good men desired to find him to be. It was a triumph of Platonism. It was *experimental proof* that the conclusion drawn by Plato from the workings of the mind and the aspirations of the heart were true; and none received the new manifestation with more undoubting faith, than the disciples of that school. We will not go so far as to say that the reasonings by which they had arrived at the conclusion thus signally verified, were logical, analytic, inductive, or capable of being indicated on any sound principles of ratiocination. But the Baconian himself must admit that *he* would have had no sufficient data to pronounce the *conclusion* false. And even now, he who takes the instincts of his nature,—his native sense of right and wrong,—his impulses and desires as facts to reason from, will continue to do so; and the author of the *Novum Organum* himself would be bound to admit, *on his own principles*, that there are no sufficient data to prove such a one to be in error. If it be an error, it is one that has long been precious to us, and is every day more and more deeply rooted in our hearts and minds, as we approach the time when all error shall be corrected, and all delusion forever dispelled.

We have dwelt the longer on this topic, because we have long been satisfied, that though it is sometimes possible to beat conviction into the head of a dunce, there is no process by which he can be taught to reason out new conclusions for himself; and we are equally sure that it is impossible to keep a man of acute, inquiring mind from inverting and applying such processes without aid from others. He takes to the use of his faculties, as soon as they unfold themselves, as naturally as a child to the use of his teeth. Observe him, and you will see at once that, without waiting to be told, he knows that he has them, and knows why they were furnished. Supply him with facts, and he will put them together for himself, and arrive at his conclusions by the same process which Lord Bacon has shown to be natural. It may be well at first to check his instinctive propensity to do this, by admonishing him not to begin to reason too soon; but when his self-taught philosophy has prepared him to understand the teachings of the Baconian school, he will find himself

in the condition of the man who had been talking prose all his life without knowing it.

We hope not to be understood as disparaging Lord Bacon, or undervaluing the service rendered by him to the world. The latter we estimate as highly as one any can ; and of Lord Bacon himself we are ready to speak in the words of General Hammond, as of "one to whom was vouchsafed the utmost intellectual capacity with which man, as far as we know, can be endowed." The merit of his achievements in the cause of truth and humanity is in his triumph over a false, artificial, scholastic logic, the fallacy of which was not more obvious to any than to them that used it. It was not that he convinced *them*. He abused others. He exposed the fallacy of a cheating system, devised to conceal the falsehood of doctrines by which men were deluded and enslaved. Had Romanism needed no disguise, the logic of the schools would probably never have been invented, or never used but for amusement. But it was no laughing matter, when, under pain of fire and faggot, men were required to reject the evidence of their senses, and to yield a zealous assent to propositions condemned by that, and by inward consciousness, because supported by a sort of logic they might not know how to answer. Had Lord Bacon done no more than to shame such sophistry out of countenance, he would have deserved the gratitude of the age he lived in. He, doubtless, did more than this ; but it is for *this* precisely that he is most praised by the sciolists who always have his name on their lips. This is what they call the introduction of a new method of reasoning, when, we have no doubt, it was no more than a restoration of the method used by Noah before the flood, and the exposure and suppression of an artificial juggle, devised to silence all, while convincing none. And this, too, was no new device. It was but the application of an old and innocent trick to a new and wicked purpose. It was as old as Eubulides, and no more disproved the soundness of syllogistic reasoning, than the sophisms of his school discredited the demonstrations of Euclid. And who, at this day, questions the justness of a conclusion deduced by regular syllogism, because a fallacy may be so presented, as to look like one to the unskilful ? Let it contradict the evidence of his senses, or his inward consciousness, or any known truth, and not only will he reject it, but the logician himself will tell him how to

detect, expose and refute it. It was but the other day that we saw an algebraic equation so worked, as to prove three to be equal to nothing. It might have perplexed a learner, but whom would it have convinced? Is algebra, therefore, fallacious? No; and the professor who had prepared the puzzle was at hand to solve it. If, indeed, he had an end to answer by it, he might have withheld the explanation. He might have built on it a new argument in favor of the Trinity in Unity; for if, as all will admit, nothing is not greater than one, and if, as he had proved, three is not greater than nothing, then three is not greater than one. Such are the tricks that men play for their amusement. But is logic or algebra, therefore, answerable for the folly of those, who, on such grounds, would discredit either the evidence of their senses, or the great fundamental doctrine of revealed truth? When schoolmen thus imposed on the simplicity of the unlearned, Lord Bacon taught their dupes to laugh at them. But did he teach them to laugh at *genuine logical reasoning*?

Lord Bacon saw that men had not facts enough to reason from. They had begun their speculations too soon. He advised them to collect more facts. It was the same advice which, as the story goes, that merry monarch, Charles II., hinted to the royal society. He proposed, it is said, that they should investigate the cause "why a tub of water with a fish in it, weighs no more than the same tub and water without the fish." They wrote many learned treatises which were handed to him, but as he liked a joke better than learned disquisitions, instead of reading them, he asked if they had weighed the tub with and without the fish. Lord Bacon, too, seems to have thought that in seeking facts to reason from, it is best to resort, when practicable, to the evidence of the senses. We remember to have once heard this same suggestion made by a pert chap to a grave professor. The latter, in lecturing on the uses of the pendulum, had said that it might be employed to settle a point then in dispute about the height of the Natural Bridge. "Go on the bridge," said he, "let down a uniform rod to the bottom, make it vibrate, compare its vibrations with those of the second pendulum, and then, by calculation, you get the exact length." "Would it not do," said the youngster, "to measure the rod." In all but the modesty that characterized

that great man, the boy was a young Lord Bacon. For what said he, "Get as many of your facts as you can from the evidence of the senses, and seek the rest by induction." And yet we doubt whether the most zealous Baconian, having one angle and two sides of a triangle, would go a mile to *measure* the third side.

Yet, because of this, Lord Bacon is cited as authority, for a low, grovelling, sensual, earthy system, "the Gospel of enlightened selfishness" which calls itself utilitarian. While it denies the importance of any considerations, the value of which cannot be estimated in dollars and cents, it rejects all arguments drawn from the inner consciousness of man, his hopes, his aspirations, and his moral sense. For this last it claims the authority of Locke. Strong in this, it rejects all other authority but that which a selfish philosophy, the nurse of self-sufficiency, attributes to its own dogmas. It learns to turn a deaf ear to conscience, scoffs at the idea of any communication with the mind but through the outward senses, and thus, while it hardens the heart, it fortifies the understanding to repel all belief in the influence of the spirit of God. We shall not here discuss these topics. But we are curious to know what a disciple of Locke, who should be at the same time a disciple of Bacon, and, as such, bound to succumb to the evidence of experiment, would say to the experiments of Mesmerism. Would he deny the evidence of his senses (awarding to Locke the only witnesses) or, in defiance of Bacon, declare that experiment proves nothing; or would he admit that the mind is, in some way inscrutable to him, susceptible of ideas and influences that do not reach it through the bodily senses? Do such men never dream? And have they yet invented a theory of dreams, according to which the mind, without the least conscious exercise of the thinking faculty, may be forced into conviction of a cherished error, by arguments seemingly proceeding from the lips of another? Are such arguments furnished by the dreamer's own reason? Is the image, which, floating before the pleased imagination, and engaging all the faculties in delightful contemplation, suddenly vanishes, and is replaced by some form of horror, dispelled by himself?

We justly call this the age of discovery; and this is the boast of these men above all others. Where would they now be in the *march of mind*, if, fifty years ago, they could have rooted themselves immovably in the conviction that

there were no "secrets in Heaven and earth not dreamed of in their Philosophy." Yet this is precisely what they now do, in regard to the most interesting and least explored of all the realms of science. The most valuable truth that discovery makes known to the philosophic mind, is the depth of its former ignorance. It teaches the nothingness of what was known before, and the innumerable errors in which it had been involved. Should it not suggest that all that we have yet discovered may still be as nothing in comparison with what may yet be discovered, and that there may be even now as much error as truth in what we know. Instead of spurring on the mind in a too eager pursuit, with the presumptuous hope that we shall presently know every thing; should it not rather sober us into a steadier pace with the thought that all that the limited faculties of man can *ever* discover, may still be as nothing in comparison with that which man in the flesh shall never know? Such was its effect on Newton. The very vastness of the ocean of knowledge, on the shores of which he stood, admonished him of the nothingness of the shells and pebbles at his feet, compared with the wonders that must forever lie hid in its boundless expanse and unfathomable depths. Humbled in conscious ignorance, he was in a mood to receive the teachings of him, who alone knows all things. Aware that there was so much that he did not know, he was the last man in the world to set limits to what *might be*, and to reject evidence of any thing merely because it might seem to him impossible.

In an age when invention is every day discovering new and unappropriated objects of desire, and opening new careers in which every man may take an even start; when innovation is shaking the foundations of all recognized right, and revolution is assailing all its bulwarks; when the whole human race is divided into those who have every thing to hope, and those who have every thing to fear; the ascendant of selfishness in the mind becomes universal and absolute. In a rout or a shipwreck—in the plunder of a stormed city, or the scramble for the treasures of a newly discovered mine, the only thought of every man is to save himself, or do the best he can for himself. Yet, in the midst of all this jostling strife, some recollections of better thoughts will haunt the mind and disturb its self-complacency. Eager to be reconciled to itself, how gladly will it listen to any who will undertake to reduce the

maxims of selfishness to a plausible system, and profanely dignify it with the name of Philosophy! Such a one is hailed as the apostle of a new faith, which, all who adopt it, support with the zeal of new converts. He is a bold man, who, at such a time, will venture to assail it. "If, in this life only, he has hope, he is of all men the most miserable ;", for he will be trampled down and crushed beneath the feet of the rushing multitude whose career he crosses. But, if, perchance his name should "outlive the envy of the day," a *time will come*, when men shall do him justice, and commemorate him as "one of whom the world he lived in was not worthy." Such must be the fate, and such alone can be the hope of one, who, like General Hammond, ventures, at this time, to expose the shallow, selfish, grovelling maxims of the utilitarian school.

"When," says he, "we have armed ourselves with genuine knowledge, and learned these great and all important lessons from the past, we may be prepared to determine what our real state of progress is, and what shall be done to carry onward the mighty cause of civilization. And we cannot fail to perceive at once and to denounce the shallow falsehood of those vulgar and narrow, but too common notions of utility, which, overlooking the great essential truths that man has passions as well as wants—sentiments and reason as well as appetites and muscles, attribute our present civilization to physical and experimental philosophy and inductive reasoning on their results, and teach that the highest objects of life, the most important duties to posterity are fulfilled by constructing steam engines, and rail roads, and electric telegraphs. If, indeed, we are constrained to admit induction and experimental philosophy to be of paramount importance, it will be as applied on a higher, broader and nobler scale, to the events of time—to the motives and actions of mankind. And this was an essential feature in Bacon's system, and that on which really rests all his usefulness and all his glory. For he himself denounced experiments made for "productive rather than enlightening" purposes. He declared that "the duties of life were more than life itself"—that "the Georgics of the mind" were worthy of being celebrated in heroic verse; and embodying profound truth in a striking metaphor; he said that 'knowledges are as pyramids, whereof history is the basis.'

A single additional extract will serve to indicate the lofty point of view from which General Hammond glances over his subject. It is a cursory glance. Within the limits of an hour's speech, it could be no more; but it is the glance of an eagle-eye.

“It has been well and truly said, and generally admitted, that history is but an illustration of philosophy. Action is in the main the result of thought, and to comprehend it thoroughly we must penetrate the minds of men, and analyze their workings. To trace and understand our civilization, then, we must not only have the knowledge of the events of time, and of the deeds, and institutions, and experiments of mankind, and their ideal conceptions in poetry, and art, and oratory,—but we must study the history of Thought. Metaphysical and moral philosophy has in all enlightened ages embodied the most important ideas of the present and the past, and developed the tendencies of men’s minds in their varying but unremitting efforts to penetrate the future. But here as in common history, we find, apart from revelation, but little new in modern times. The philosophers of antiquity made the first charts of the human mind, and so complete were they, that all inquiries since have been mainly guided by them. The great Sensual school, which has prevailed so extensively for the last century and a half, and of which Locke is called the founder, may be referred directly to Aristotle, who first boldly taught that all our knowledge comes through the senses. All other schools that deserve the name, are based on one portion or another of the ideal philosophy of Plato. All philosophic theories, even the wildest and most delusive broodings of the imagination, if made by subtle reasoning to assume a consistent shape, are replete with interest and instruction, since they teach the allusions of the ages and the races, and exhibit to us the weakness and blindness of our nature, and the absurdities to which we are forever prone. But the two great schools of the Lyceum and Academy, were founded on imperishable elements in human nature, and until the second advent shall shed perfect light, they will, after all the wheat is separated from the chaff; after the momentous truths of Revelation and the mighty facts which time develops shall have been recorded over the acknowledged errors of philosophy, still, as they have so long done, divide between them a vast, unknown, and deeply interesting realm, through which all must travel, as all have travelled to whom have been given reason, feeling, and imagination. Whoever believes that all our ideas are derived from external sources through the senses, and all real knowledge from experiment; that God has given man the peculiar faculty of reason, as the only safe guide through the perilous paths of life; and that to do the right thing in the right place, *Τὸ εἶναι καὶ ΚΑΛΩΣ* is the highest human wisdom, he is a follower of Aristotle. Whoever, on the other hand, yields himself to a belief in innate ideas; whoever confides in the exalting faith that there is “a Divinity that stirs within us,” and that despite “this muddy vesture of decay that hems us in,” the Author of our being holds direct communion with our souls, regulating our impulses, guiding our instincts, and infusing into us that “longing after immortality” which sustains the struggling spirit through the

great *Μαχη Αδαναρως* of the universe,—he is a disciple of Plato the divine.

“The truly wise, the genuine christian, will perhaps endeavor in his practice to unite the virtues of both systems, and in conformity with the Apostolic injunction, perfect his faith by works, and thus consummate the civilization of mankind.”

This last sentence refers us to the only true light for the only true Philosophy. In that Philosophy selfishness has no place. “He who would save his life shall lose it,” is the grand maxim of its divine author. It is the leading maxim of all the truly great; a maxim, which, while it appears to extinguish hope, preserves it *forever unextinguishable*, and prepares men, (in the language of the wisest of uninspired men,) “to perform the tasks of hope, in the midst of despair.”