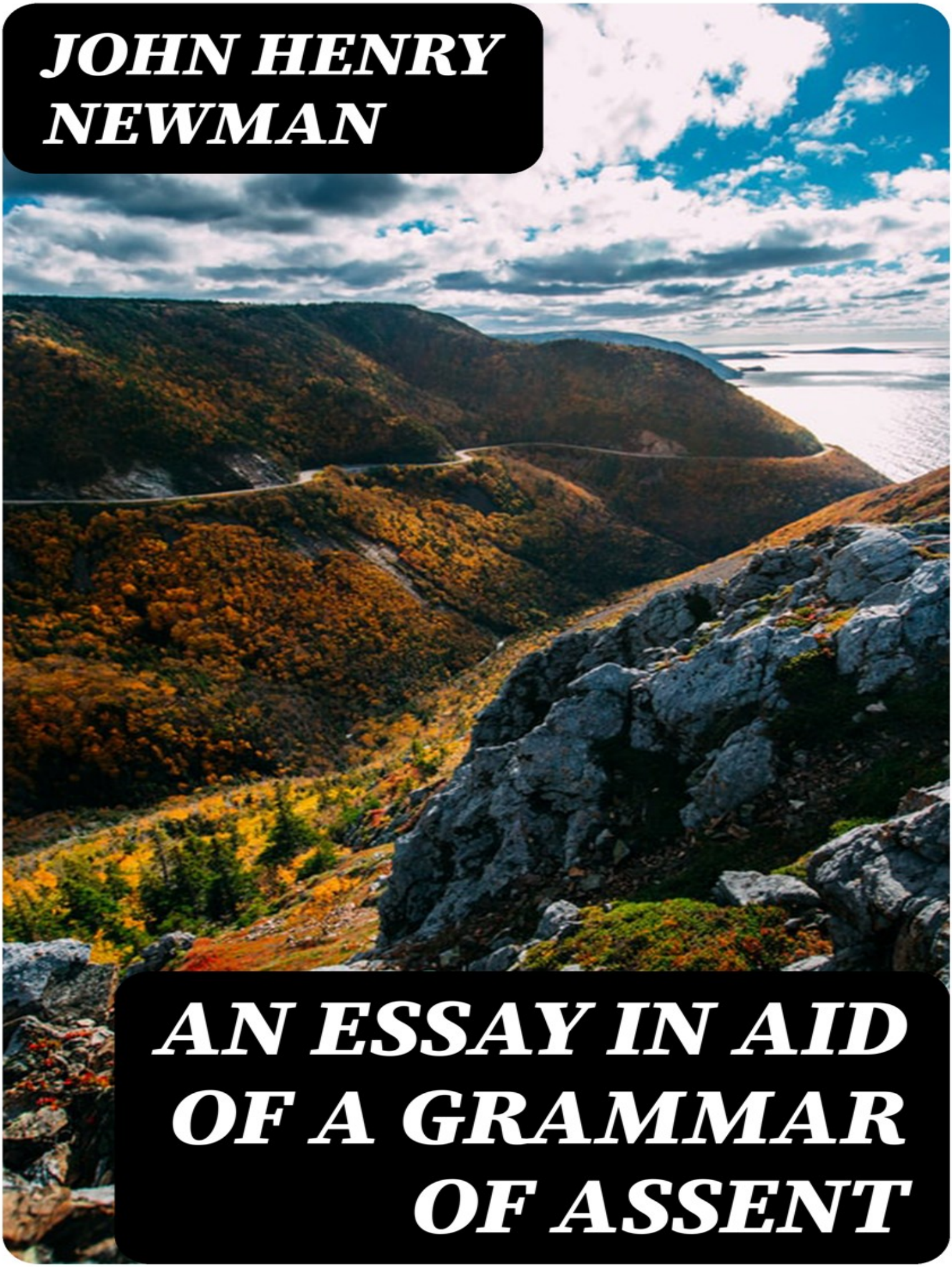
JOHN HENRY NEWMAN



AN ESSAY IN AID OF A GRAMMAR OF ASSENT

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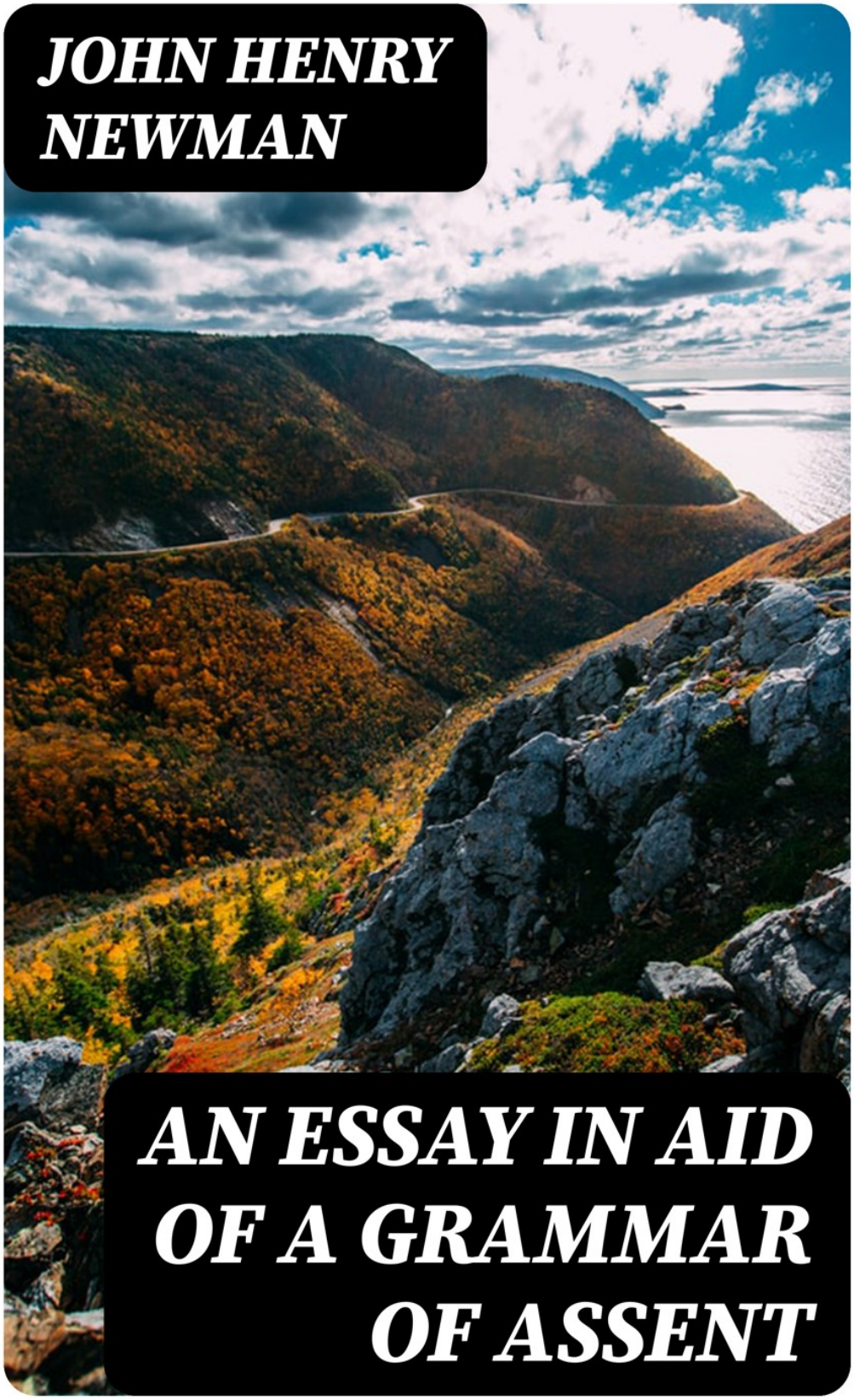

AN ESSAY IN AID OF A GRAMMAR OF ASSENT

John Henry Newman

An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent

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Dedication.

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To

Edward Bellasis,

Serjeant At Law,

In Remembrance

Of A Long, Equable, Sunny Friendship;

In Gratitude

For Continual Kindnesses Shown To Me,

For An Unwearied Zeal In My Behalf,

For A Trust In Me Which Has Never Wavered,

And A Prompt, Effectual Succour And Support

In Times Of Special Trial,

From His Affectionate

J. H. N.

February 21, 1870.

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Part I. Assent And Apprehension.

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Chapter I. Modes Of Holding And Apprehending Propositions.

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§ 1. Modes of Holding Propositions.

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1. Propositions (consisting of a subject and predicate united by the copula) may take a categorical, conditional, or interrogative form.

(1) An interrogative, when they ask a Question, (e. g. Does Free-trade benefit the poorer classes?) and imply the possibility of an affirmative or negative resolution of it.

(2) A conditional, when they express a Conclusion (e. g. Free-trade therefore benefits the poorer classes), and both imply, and imply their dependence on, other propositions.

(3) A categorical, when they simply make an Assertion (e. g. Free-trade does benefit), and imply the absence of any condition or reservation of any kind, looking neither before

nor behind, as resting in themselves and being intrinsically complete.

These three modes of shaping a proposition, distinct as they are from each other, follow each other in natural sequence. A proposition, which starts with being a [pg 004] Question, may become a Conclusion, and then be changed into an Assertion; but it has of course ceased to be a question, so far forth as it has become a conclusion, and has rid itself of its argumentative form—that is, has ceased to be a conclusion,—so far forth as it has become an assertion. A question has not yet got so far as to be a conclusion, though it is the necessary preliminary of a conclusion; and an assertion has got beyond being a mere conclusion, though it is the natural issue of a conclusion. Their correlation is the measure of their distinction one from another.

No one is likely to deny that a question is distinct both from a conclusion and from an assertion; and an assertion will be found to be equally distinct from a conclusion. For, if we rest our affirmation on arguments, this shows that we are not asserting; and, when we assert, we do not argue. An assertion is as distinct from a conclusion, as a word of command is from a persuasion or recommendation. Command and assertion, as such, both of them, in their different ways, dispense with, discard, ignore, antecedents of any kind, though antecedents may have been a *sine quâ non* condition of their being elicited. They both carry with them the pretension of being personal acts.

In insisting on the intrinsic distinctness of these three modes of putting a proposition, I am not maintaining that they may not co-exist as regards one and the same subject. For what we have already concluded, we may, if we will, make a question of; and what we are asserting, we may of course conclude over again. We may assert, to one man, and conclude to another, [pg 005] and ask of a third; still, when we assert, we do not conclude, and, when we assert or conclude, we do not question.

2. The internal act of holding propositions is for the most part analogous to the external act of enunciating them; as there are three ways of enunciating, so are there three ways of holding them, each corresponding to each. These three mental acts are Doubt, Inference, and Assent. A question is the expression of a doubt; a conclusion is the expression of an act of inference; and an assertion is the expression of an act of assent. To doubt, for instance, is not to see one's way to hold that Free-trade is or that it is not a benefit; to infer, is to hold on sufficient grounds that Free-trade may, must, or should be a benefit; to assent to the proposition, is to hold that Free-trade is a benefit.

Moreover, propositions, while they are the material of these three enunciations, are the objects of the three corresponding mental acts; and as without a proposition, there cannot be a question, conclusion, or assertion, so without a proposition there is nothing to doubt about, nothing to infer, nothing to assent to. Mental acts of whatever kind presuppose their objects.

And, since the three enunciations are distinct from each other, therefore the three mental acts also, Doubt, Inference, and Assent, are, with reference to one and the same proposition, distinct from each other; else, why should their several enunciations be distinct? And indeed it is very evident, that, so far forth as we infer, we do not doubt, and that, when we assent, [pg 006] we are not inferring, and, when we doubt, we cannot assent.

And in fact, these three modes of entertaining propositions,—doubting them, inferring them, assenting to them, are so distinct in their action, that, when they are severally carried out into the intellectual habits of an individual, they become the principles and notes of three distinct states or characters of mind. For instance, in the case of Revealed Religion, according as one or other of these is paramount within him, a man is a sceptic as regards it; or a philosopher, thinking it more or less probable considered as a conclusion of reason; or he has an unhesitating faith in it, and is recognized as a believer. If he simply disbelieves, or dissents, he is assenting to the contradictory of the thesis, viz. that there is no Revelation.

Many minds of course there are, which are not under the predominant influence of any one of the three. Thus men are to be found of irreflective, impulsive, unsettled, or again of acute minds, who do not know what they believe and what they do not, and who may be by turns sceptics, inquirers, or believers; who doubt, assent, infer, and doubt again, according to the circumstances of the season. Nay further, in all minds there is a certain coexistence of these

distinct acts; that is, of two of them, for we can at once infer and assent, though we cannot at once either assent or infer and also doubt. Indeed, in a multitude of cases we infer truths, or apparent truths, before, and while, and after we assent to them.

Lastly, it cannot be denied that these three acts are all natural to the mind; I mean, that, in exercising [pg 007] them, we are not violating the laws of our nature, as if they were in themselves an extravagance or weakness, but are acting according to it, according to its legitimate constitution. Undoubtedly, it is possible, it is common, in the particular case, to err in the exercise of Doubt, of Inference, and of Assent; that is, we may be withholding a judgment about propositions on which we have the means of coming to some definitive conclusion; or we may be assenting to propositions which we ought to receive only on the credit of their premisses, or again to keep ourselves in suspense about; but such errors of the individual belong to the individual, not to his nature, and cannot avail to forfeit for him his natural right, under proper circumstances, to doubt, or to infer, or to assent. We do but fulfil our nature in doubting, inferring, and assenting; and our duty is, not to abstain from the exercise of any function of our nature, but to do what is in itself right rightly.

3. So far in general:—in this Essay I treat of propositions only in their bearing upon concrete matter, and I am mainly concerned with Assent; with Inference, in its relation to Assent, and only such inference as is not demonstration; with Doubt hardly at all. I dismiss Doubt with one

observation. I have here spoken of it simply as a suspense of mind, in which sense of the word, to have “no doubt” about a thesis is equivalent to one or other of the two remaining acts, either to inferring it or else assenting to it. However, the word is often taken to mean the deliberate recognition of a thesis as being uncertain; in this sense Doubt is nothing [pg 008] else than an assent, viz. an assent to a proposition at variance with the thesis, as I have already noticed in the case of Disbelief.

Confining myself to the subject of Assent and Inference, I observe two points of contrast between them.

The first I have already noted. Assent is unconditional; else, it is not really represented by assertion. Inference is conditional, because a conclusion at least implies the assumption of premisses, and still more, because in concrete matter, on which I am engaged, demonstration is impossible.

The second has regard to the apprehension necessary for holding a proposition. We cannot assent to a proposition, without some intelligent apprehension of it; whereas we need not understand it at all in order to infer it. We cannot give our assent to the proposition that “x is z,” till we are told something about one or other of the terms; but we can infer, if “x is y, and y is z, that x is z,” whether we know the meaning of x and z or no.

These points of contrast and their results will come before us in due course: here, for a time leaving the consideration of the modes of holding propositions, I

proceed to inquire into what is to be understood by apprehending them.

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§ 2. Modes of apprehending Propositions.

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By our apprehension of propositions I mean our imposition of a sense on the terms of which they are composed. Now what do the terms of a proposition, the subject and predicate, stand for? Sometimes they stand for certain ideas existing in our own minds, and for nothing outside of them; sometimes for things simply external to us, brought home to us through the experiences and informations we have of them. All things in the exterior world are unit and individual, and are nothing else; but the mind not only contemplates those unit realities, as they exist, but has the gift, by an act of creation, of bringing before it abstractions and generalizations, which have no existence, no counterpart, out of it.

Now there are propositions, in which one or both of the terms are common nouns, as standing for what is abstract,

general, and non-existing, such as “Man is an animal, some men are learned, an Apostle is a creation of Christianity, a line is length without breadth, to err is human, to forgive divine.” These I shall call notional propositions, and the apprehension with which we infer or assent to them, notional.

And there are other propositions, which are composed of singular nouns, and of which the terms stand for [pg 010] things external to us, unit and individual, as “Philip was the father of Alexander,” “the earth goes round the sun,” “the Apostles first preached to the Jews;” and these I shall call real propositions, and their apprehension real.

There are then two apprehensions or interpretations to which propositions may be subjected, notional and real.

Next I observe, that the same proposition may admit of both of these interpretations at once, having a notional sense as used by one man, and a real as used by another. Thus a schoolboy may perfectly apprehend, and construe with spirit, the poet's words, “Dum Capitolium scandet cum tacitâ Virgine Pontifex;” he has seen steep hills, flights of steps, and processions; he knows what enforced silence is; also he knows all about the Pontifex Maximus, and the Vestal Virgins; he has an abstract hold upon every word of the description, yet without the words therefore bringing before him at all the living image which they would light up in the mind of a contemporary of the poet, who had seen the fact described, or of a modern historian who had duly informed himself in the religious phenomena, and by

meditation had realized the Roman ceremonial, of the age of Augustus. Again, “Dulce et decorum est pro patriâ mori,” is a mere common-place, a terse expression of abstractions in the mind of the poet himself, if Philippi is to be the index of his patriotism, whereas it would be the record of experiences, a sovereign dogma, a grand aspiration, inflaming the imagination, piercing the heart, of a Wallace or a Tell.

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As the multitude of common nouns have originally been singular, it is not surprising that many of them should so remain still in the apprehension of particular individuals. In the proposition “Sugar is sweet,” the predicate is a common noun as used by those who have compared sugar in their thoughts with honey or glycerine; but it may be the only distinctively sweet thing in the experience of a child, and may be used by him as a noun singular. The first time that he tastes sugar, if his nurse says, “Sugar is sweet” in a notional sense, meaning by sugar, lump-sugar, powdered, brown, and candied, and by sweet, a specific flavour or scent which is found in many articles of food and many flowers, he may answer in a real sense, and in an individual proposition “Sugar is sweet,” meaning “this sugar is this sweet thing.”

Thirdly, in the same mind and at the same time, the same proposition may express both what is notional and what is real. When a lecturer in mechanics or chemistry shows to his class by experiment some physical fact, he and his hearers at once enunciate it as an individual thing before

their eyes, and also as generalized by their minds into a law of nature. When Virgil says, “Varium et mutabile semper fœmina,” he both sets before his readers what he means to be a general truth, and at the same time applies it individually to the instance of Dido. He expresses at once a notion and a fact.

Of these two modes of apprehending propositions, notional and real, real is the stronger; I mean by stronger the more vivid and forcible. It is so to be accounted for the very reason that it is concerned with what is [pg 012] either real or taken for real; for intellectual ideas cannot compete in effectiveness with the experience of concrete facts. Various proverbs and maxims sanction me in so speaking, such as, “Facts are stubborn things,” “Experientia docet,” “Seeing is believing;” and the popular contrast between theory and practice, reason and sight, philosophy and faith. Not that real apprehension, as such, impels to action, any more than notional; but it excites and stimulates the affections and passions, by bringing facts home to them as motive causes. Thus it indirectly brings about what the apprehension of large principles, of general laws, or of moral obligations, never could effect.

Reverting to the two modes of holding propositions, conditional and unconditional, which was the subject of the former Section, that is, inferences and assents, I observe that inferences, which are conditional acts, are especially cognate to notional apprehension, and assents, which are

unconditional, to real. This distinction, too, will come before us in the course of the following chapters.

And now I have stated the main subjects of which I propose to treat; viz., the distinctions in the use of propositions, which I have been drawing, and the questions which those distinctions involve.

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Chapter II. Assent Considered As Apprehensive.

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I have already said of an act of Assent, first, that it is in itself the absolute acceptance of a proposition without any condition; and next that, in order to its being made, it presupposes the condition, not only of some previous inference in favour of the proposition, but especially of some concomitant apprehension of its terms. I proceed to the latter of these two subjects; that is, of Assent considered as apprehensive, leaving the discussion of Assent as unconditional for a later place in this Essay.

By apprehension of a proposition, I mean, as I have already said, the interpretation given to the terms of which it is composed. When we infer, we consider a proposition in relation to other propositions; when we assent to it, we consider it for its own sake and in its intrinsic sense. That sense must be in some degree known to us; else, we do but assert the proposition, we in no wise assent to it. Assent I have described to be a mental assertion; in its very nature then it is of the mind, and not of the lips. We can assert without assenting; assent is more than assertion just by this much, that it is accompanied by some apprehension of [pg 014] the matter asserted. This is plain; and the only question is, what measure of apprehension is sufficient.

And the answer to this question is equally plain:—it is the predicate of the proposition which must be apprehended. In a proposition one term is predicated of another; the subject is referred to the predicate, and the predicate gives us information about the subject;—therefore to apprehend the proposition is to have that information, and to assent to it is to acquiesce in it as true. Therefore I apprehend a proposition, when I apprehend its predicate. The subject itself need not be apprehended *per se* in order to a genuine assent: for it is the very thing which the predicate has to elucidate, and therefore by its formal place in the proposition, so far as it is the subject, it is something unknown, something which the predicate makes known; but the predicate cannot make it known, unless it is known itself. Let the question be, “What is Trade?” here is a distinct profession of ignorance about “Trade;” and let the answer be, “Trade is the interchange of goods;”—trade then need not be known, as a condition of assent to the proposition, except so far as the account of it which is given in answer, “the interchange of goods,” makes it known; and that must be apprehended in order to make it known. The very drift of the proposition is to tell us something about the subject; but there is no reason why our knowledge of the subject, whatever it is, should go beyond what the predicate tells us about it. Further than this the subject need not be apprehended: as far as this it must; it will not be apprehended thus far, unless we apprehend the predicate.

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If a child asks, “What is Lucern?” and is answered, “Lucern is medicago sativa, of the class Diadelphia and

order Decandria;” and henceforth says obediently, “Lucern is medicago sativa, &c.,” he makes no act of assent to the proposition which he enunciates, but speaks like a parrot. But, if he is told, “Lucern is food for cattle,” and is shown cows grazing in a meadow, then though he never saw lucern, and knows nothing at all about it, besides what he has learned from the predicate, he is in a position to make as genuine an assent to the proposition “Lucern is food for cattle,” on the word of his informant, as if he knew ever so much more about lucern. And as soon as he has got as far as this, he may go further. He now knows enough about lucern, to enable him to apprehend propositions which have lucern for their predicate, should they come before him for assent, as, “That field is sown with lucern,” or “Clover is not lucern.”

Yet there is a way, in which the child can give an indirect assent even to a proposition, in which he understood neither subject nor predicate. He cannot indeed in that case assent to the proposition itself, but he can assent to its truth. He cannot do more than assert that “Lucern is medicago sativa,” but he can assent to the proposition, “That lucern is medicago sativa is true.” For here is a predicate which he sufficiently apprehends, what is inapprehensible in the proposition being confined to the subject. Thus the child's mother might teach him to repeat a passage of Shakespeare, and when he asked the meaning of a particular line, such as “The quality of mercy is not strained,” or “Virtue itself turns [pg 016] vice, being misapplied,” she might answer him, that he was too young to understand it yet, but that it had a beautiful meaning, as

he would one day know: and he, in faith on her word, might give his assent to such a proposition,—not, that is, to the line itself which he had got by heart, and which would be beyond him, but to its being true, beautiful, and good.

Of course I am speaking of assent itself, and its intrinsic conditions, not of the ground or motive of it. Whether there is an obligation upon the child to trust his mother, or whether there are cases where such trust is impossible, are irrelevant questions, and I notice them in order to put them aside. I am examining the act of assent itself, not its preliminaries, and I have specified three directions, which among others the assent may take, viz. assent immediately to a proposition, assent to its truth, and assent both to its truth and to the ground of its being true together,—“Lucern is food for cattle,”—“That lucern is medicago sativa is true,”—and “My mother's word, that lucern is medicago sativa, and is food for cattle, is the truth.” Now in each of these there is one and the same absolute adhesion of the mind to the proposition, on the part of the child; he assents to the apprehensible proposition, and to the truth of the inapprehensible, and to the veracity of his mother in her assertion of the inapprehensible. I say the same absolute adhesion, because, unless he did assent without any reserve to the proposition that lucern was food for cattle, or to the accuracy of the botanical name and description of it, he would not be giving an unreserved assent to his mother's word: yet, though these assents are all unreserved, [pg 017] still they certainly differ in strength, and this is the next point to which I wish to draw attention. It is indeed plain, that, though the child assents to his mother's veracity,

without perhaps being conscious of his own act, nevertheless that particular assent of his has a force and life in it which the other assents have not, insomuch as he apprehends the proposition, which is the subject of it, with greater keenness and energy than belongs to his apprehension of the others. Her veracity and authority is to him no abstract truth or item of general knowledge, but is bound up with that image and love of her person which is part of himself, and makes a direct claim on him for his summary assent to her general teachings.

Accordingly, by reason of this circumstance of his apprehension he would not hesitate to say, did his years admit of it, that he would lay down his life in defence of his mother's veracity. On the other hand, he would not make such a profession in the case of the propositions, “Lucern is food for cattle,” or “That lucern is medicago sativa is true;” and yet it is clear too, that, if he did in truth assent to these propositions, he would have to die for them also, rather than deny them, when it came to the point, unless he made up his mind to tell a falsehood. That he would have to die for all three propositions severally rather than deny them, shows the completeness and absoluteness of assent in its very nature; that he would not spontaneously challenge so severe a trial in the case of two out of the three particular acts of assent, illustrates in what sense one assent may be stronger than another.

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It appears then, that, in assenting to propositions, an apprehension in some sense of their terms is not only

necessary to assent, as such, but also gives a distinct character to its acts. If therefore we would know more about Assent, we must know more about the apprehension which accompanies it. Accordingly to the subject of Apprehension I proceed.

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Chapter III. The Apprehension Of Propositions.

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I said in my Introductory Chapter that there can be no assent to a proposition, without some sort of apprehension of its terms; next that there are two modes of apprehension, notional and real; thirdly, that, while assent may be given to a proposition on either apprehension of it, still its acts are elicited more heartily and forcibly, when they are made upon real apprehension which has things for its objects, than when they are made in favour of notions and with a notional apprehension. The first of these three points I have just been discussing; now I will proceed to the second, viz. the two modes of apprehending propositions, leaving the third for the Chapters which follow.

I have used the word *apprehension*, and not *understanding*, because the latter word is of uncertain meaning, standing sometimes for the faculty or act of conceiving a proposition, sometimes for that of comprehending it, neither of which come into the sense of *apprehension*. It is possible to apprehend without understanding. I apprehend what is meant by saying that John is Richard's wife's father's aunt's husband, [pg 020] but, if I am unable so to take in these successive

relationships as to understand the upshot of the whole, viz. that John is great-uncle-in-law to Richard, I cannot be said to understand the proposition. In like manner, I may take a just view of a man's conduct, and therefore apprehend it, and yet may profess that I cannot understand it; that is, I have not the key to it, and do not see its consistency in detail: I have no just conception of it. Apprehension then is simply an intelligent acceptance of the idea or of the fact which a proposition enunciates. “Pride will have a fall;” “Napoleon died at St. Helena;” I have no difficulty in entering into the sentiment contained in the former of these, or into the fact declared in the latter; that is, I apprehend them both.

Now apprehension, as I have said, has two subject-matters:—according as language expresses things external to us, or our own thoughts, so is apprehension real or notional. It is notional in the grammarian, it is real in the experimentalist. The grammarian has to determine the force of words and phrases; he has to master the structure of sentences and the composition of paragraphs; he has to compare language with language, to ascertain the common ideas expressed under different idiomatic forms, and to achieve the difficult work of recasting the mind of an original author in the mould of a translation. On the other hand, the philosopher or experimentalist aims at investigating, questioning, ascertaining facts, causes, effects, actions, qualities: these are things, and he makes his words distinctly subordinate to these, as means to an end. The primary duty of [pg 021] a literary man is to have clear conceptions, and to be exact and intelligible in expressing them; but in a philosopher it is even a merit to

be not altogether vague, inchoate and obscure in his teaching, and if he fails even of this low standard of language, we remind ourselves that his obscurity perhaps is owing to his depth. No power of words in a lecturer would be sufficient to make psychology easy to his hearers; if they are to profit by him, they must throw their minds into the matters in discussion, must accompany his treatment of them with an active, personal concurrence, and interpret for themselves, as he proceeds, the dim suggestions and adumbrations of objects, which he has a right to presuppose, while he uses them, as images existing in their apprehension as well as in his own.

In something of a parallel way it is the least pardonable fault in an Orator to fail in clearness of style, and the most pardonable fault of a Poet.

So again, an Economist is dealing with facts; whatever there is of theory in his work professes to be founded on facts, by facts alone must his sense be interpreted, and to those only who are well furnished with the necessary facts does he address himself; yet a clever schoolboy, from a thorough grammatical knowledge of both languages, might turn into English a French treatise on national wealth, produce, consumption, labour, profits, measures of value, public debt, and the circulating medium, with an apprehension of what it was that his author was stating sufficient for making it clear to an English reader, while he had not the faintest conception himself what the treatise, which he was translating [pg 022] really determined. The

man uses language as the vehicle of things, and the boy of abstractions.

Hence in literary examinations, it is a test of good scholarship to be able to construe aright, without the aid of understanding the sentiment, action, or historical occurrence conveyed in the passage thus accurately rendered, let it be a battle in Livy, or some subtle train of thought in Virgil or Pindar. And those who have acquitted themselves best in the trial, will often be disposed to think they have most notably failed, for the very reason that they have been too busy with the grammar of each sentence, as it came, to have been able, as they construed on, to enter into the facts or the feelings, which, unknown to themselves, they were bringing out of it.

To take a very different instance of this contrast between notions and facts;—pathology and medicine, in the interests of science, and as a protection to the practitioner, veil the shocking realities of disease and physical suffering under a notional phraseology, under the abstract terms of debility, distress, irritability, paroxysm, and a host of Greek and Latin words. The arts of medicine and surgery are necessarily experimental; but for writing and conversing on these subjects they require to be stripped of the association of the facts from which they are derived.

Such are the two modes of apprehension. The terms of a proposition do or do not stand for things. If they do, then they are singular terms, for all things that are, are units. But if they do not stand for things they must stand for notions,

and are common terms. Singular [pg 023] nouns come from experience, common from abstraction. The apprehension of the former I call real, and of the latter notional. Now let us look at this difference between them more narrowly.

1. Real Apprehension, is, as I have said, in the first instance an experience or information about the concrete. Now, when these informations are in fact presented to us, (that is, when they are directly subjected to our bodily senses or our mental sensations, as when we say, “The sun shines,” or “The prospect is charming,” or indirectly by means of a picture or even a narrative,) then there is no difficulty in determining what is meant by saying that our enunciation of a proposition concerning them implies an apprehension of things; because we can actually point out the objects which they indicate. But supposing those things are no longer before us, supposing they have passed beyond our field of view, or the book is closed in which the description of them occurs, how can an apprehension of things be said to remain to us? It remains on our minds by means of the faculty of memory. Memory consists in a present imagination of things that are past; memory retains the impressions and likenesses of what they were when before us; and when we make use of the proposition which refers to them, it supplies us with objects by which to interpret it. They are things still, as being the reflections of things in a mental mirror.

Hence the poet calls memory “the mind's eye.” I am in a foreign country among unfamiliar sights; at will I am able to conjure up before me the vision of my home, and all that