

ABSTRACTIONISTS.¹

There are two ways of reasoning about human affairs. One is, to bring measures to the test of fundamental principles, and abide by their decision firmly. The other is, to inquire: "What is the dictate of policy, of expediency, of present utility?" There are two classes of minds in the world: the speculative, and the practical. The former seeks to analyze its objects of thought, to arrive at ultimate truths, and from those truths, to deduce its practical conclusions. The other only considers propositions, in the light of their practical consequences as perceived by itself. The former looks at general laws: the latter at immediate results.

Now the latter class of people have applied to the former, in these days of ours, a name, which is at least new in its present sense: *abstractionists*. It is subject of joy, for the sake of the credit of the Church, that this name was first invented among politicians; but it is to be lamented, that the Church's people have, to her disgrace, borrowed the name with its contemptuous meaning, from the politicians. An abstraction, properly understood, means, a proposition considered as naked and general, stripped of all the accidental circumstances which belong to any individual case under it. But the idea which some of those seem to have, who use the word as a term of contempt, is that it is just something which is abstruse. Those who know what they mean by it, if there are any such, probably intend by abstractions, *speculative principles*, as opposed to practical conclusions.

Among the many good results of popular government in church and state, there is this unfortunate one: that its usages tend to teach the governing minds to despise speculative thought, and reason only from present expediency. It is the popular mind, with which they have to deal: and that mostly in the fugitive form of oral address, or the flimsy newspaper argument, where the whole result intended, is a momentary im-

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pression. The minds addressed, are not trained to speculation, and could not comprehend it. Hence, public men are tempted to disuse it, till they become incapable of it themselves; and all profundity and breadth of view are neglected, or even despised, in reasoning of public affairs. Men aim only to catch the public ear by some shallow argument of present expediency; and brand all appeals to more fundamental truths "as abstractions,"—gossamer speculations unworthy to hind the strong common sense of practical people. Thus, it is proposed, in federal politics, to institute some measure, the argument for which is present utility. Its opponents object, that it is not within the legitimate scope of the federal institutions; and to institute it would be a virtual breach of constitutional compacts. "Ah," says its advocate, "that is one of your 'abstractions.' Isn't the measure a good one in its practical effect? Then why not adopt it?" Or, in church affairs; one good brother proposes, that the Church shall take into its own official hand, the business of education, and imbue it properly with the Christian element. Another brother objects, that to educate is not the divinely appointed function of a church. "Why," asks the first, "don't you admit that all education ought to be Christian education?" "Oh, yes," says the respondent; "but it is the function of Christian parents; combining, if necessary; but as parents, not as presbyters." "What of that?" says the first; "our church schools are very good things: very harmless things as yet: and where is the difference between a combination of certain men as Christian parents, to make and govern a certain sort of school, and a combination of the same men as presbyters to make the same sort of school?" "There is the difference of the principle involved," it is answered; "and it is never safe to admit a false principle." "Pshaw," says the first; "that is nothing but one of your 'abstractions.'"

The term is intended to be one of contempt. It is supposed to describe something uncertain, vague, devious, sophistical: as opposed to that which is positive, sensible and reliable. The "abstractionist" is represented as a man, fanciful and unreliable; who pursues the intangible moonshine of metaphysical ideas, until he and his followers "wander, in devious mazes lost." But if any of the men who attempt abstractions are vague

or sophistical, is it because they use abstract propositions; or because they misuse them? If men choose to be careless or dishonest in their thinking;—if they will mix or vary the terms of their propositions, or commit any other logical errors, they will be erroneous, however they may reason. And we assert, as an offset to this reproach, that no truths can be general, except those which are abstract: for by the very reason that concrete propositions are concrete, they must be particular, or individual; and therefore no deduction made from them, can have any certainty when it is attempted to give it a general application. The concrete is best for illustration, but for general reasoning it is useless: and all gentlemen who are accustomed to boast, that they are not “abstractionists,” thereby confess that their arguments are only illustrations. If they wish to glorify their logic therein, they are welcome.

But that any *educated man* should indulge in this slang of the hustings and the demagogue, is derogatory to his own intelligence, and his fraternity. For every man of information ought to know, that abstractions are the most practical things in the world. His reading ought to remind him how directly the most abstract truths have led on to the most practical conclusions; how inevitably they work themselves out into practical results, and how uniformly the most practical truths depend for their evidence on those which are abstract. There is no branch of human science, which does not teem with illustrations of this. Our anti-abstractionists would probably consider it rather a shadowy question, if they were called to debate whether or not Galvanism and Magnetism are generically distinct or like; two somethings impalpable, invisible, imponderable, which we hardly know whether to call substances or not. Yet, on the answer to that question depended the invention of the *Magnetic Telegraph*, with all its very practical results, in the regulating of the prices of breadstuffs, the catching of fugitive rogues, and the announcement of the end of dead emperors. Latent caloric strikes us as a rather abstract thing: a something which no human nerve ever has, or ever will feel, and which the most delicate thermometer does not reveal. And about this shadowy something, a very shadowy proposition has been proved by your contemptible abstractionists: namely, that in certain cases, sen-

sible heat becoming latent, increases elasticity. This is the abstraction which revealed to mankind the secret steam engine; and which now propells our boats, spins our cloths, grinds our flour, saws our lumber, ploughs the ocean with our floating palaces, whirls us across continents in the rail-cars, and sometimes scalds or cripples us by the score. A rather practical thing, is this abstraction.

Or, let us take illustrations from the moral sciences. Every well informed man ought to know that the abstract question, whether general ideas are substances, conception, or names, once almost threw Europe into fits, armed universities, and even commonwealths against each other, and probably cost John Huss his life. Whether what we call *causation* is a real and necessary connexion, or merely an observed sequence of events, is a very abstract question: but it makes all the difference between a God and no God: yea, all the difference between the blessings, civilization, wholesome restraints and happiness of religion, and the license, vice, atrocity and despair of Atheism. Indeed your thorough Atheist, is the only true and consistent anti-abstractionist. Jonathan Edwards' work on the will, is usually thought rather an abstract book, on a rather abstract subject. Its great question is, whether volitions are certain, according to the prevalent bent of the dispositions, or self-determining. But the answer to this abstract question decides authoritatively between Calvinism and Pelagianism. Presbyterians, we think, have found the latter quite a practical matter! Can human merit be imputed to another human being, in God's government, as it is in man's? "A very useless, unpractical question," you say. "I don't care to speculate in such unsubstantial merchandise." Well, from the affirmative answer to that question Thomas Aquinas deduced the grand system of *Papal Indulgences*. Here is an abstraction out of which grew a good many important matters: such as a good many millions of crowns transferred out of the pockets of good Catholics, into those of "his Holiness the Pope";—the zeal of Luther against Tetzal, and thence the Reformation—with English liberty and through that, American; with a good many other very practical affairs. But enough. The most abstract propositions have often divided nations, and led to wars, revolutions, and

convulsions: just as that abstraction, "whether a man can rightfully own as property, the labor of a fellow man without his voluntary consent," now threatens our nation with fratricidal and suicidal war. There is no practical truth, in the evidence of which an abstract one is not concerned. There is no abstract truth which may not lead, by logical necessity, to practical results. How unthinking, and ignorant ought a man to be, in order to utter an honest, sincere sneer against dealings and dealers in abstractions? Very stupid indeed. Again; such sneers are always inconsistent. Every man is an abstractionist, except perhaps the materialist—atheist, who does not believe there is any God, because he has never seen Him, or that he has any soul, because he cannot handle it. Those who contemptuously disavow it, only do so when the abstractions are against them; and strenuously use similar abstractions, on their own side. How literally has this been verified in federal politics? In truth, no man can help it; for the foundation of every man's right, theory, or project, whatever it may be, is on an abstract principle. And the veriest red-Republican of them all, who thinks he has trampled down every abstraction, still relies on his own favorite ones, to sustain his radicalism. Says the Agrarian: "Here is my rich neighbor, who has more than he can possibly use, or even waste. How much better to take away a part, and give it to me, who need a little capital to enable me to be a producing citizen. You will thereby benefit me, the state, and my rich neighbor himself: for he is so rich that it is an actual injury to him." You object, that the rights of property are in the way; and that it is of more fundamental importance to the state, that those rights should be protected, and that every man should be certain of the rewards of his industry, than that property should be equally distributed. These are in his eyes, nothing but abstractions. Why should a citizen be kept back from obvious and present advantage, by the gossamer threads of those abstract rights? So he helps himself liberally to his neighbor's property, and thus becomes a man of property himself. And now, lo! he forthwith invokes those abstract rights of property, to defend his new acquisitions against other red-Republicans, as greedy as himself, but still poorer.

But the serious and lamentable point about all this decry-

ing of abstractions is, that where it is intelligently and deliberately uttered, it is thoroughly profligate. What is it all, but a demand that principle shall give way to expediency? All the principles of morals, in their last analysis, are abstractions. The distinction between right and wrong is an abstraction, as pure and disembodied as was ever presented by metaphysics. And in short, the difference between an honest man and a scoundrel, is but this: that the former is governed by a general principle, which is an abstraction, in opposition to the present concrete prospect of utility; while the latter is governed by his view of present expediency, in opposition to the general principle. What else do we mean by saying that a man is *un principled*? In the eyes of such a man, the restraints of a constitution which he has sworn to support, are abstractions, whenever they seem to oppose the present dictates of expediency. All those broad and wise considerations, which show how much more important is a consistent adherence to general principles, than the gain of a temporary and partial advantage by their violation, are but abstractions. And with the same justice, though with greater impiety, it might also be said, that the immutable principles of eternal rectitude, to which God compels all the interests of the universe to bend, at whatever cost of individual misery, are abstractions. What, for instance, is the principle, which constitutes the necessity for an atonement? What, except that necessary connexion, which the unchangeable perfections of God have established between the abstract guilt of sin, and the penalty? "Now here is a penitent man," says the Socinian; "a wondrous pious, proper man: he is never going to sin any more: (the self-determining power of his own will has decided that.) Who will be the worse for his pardon? Why should he go to perdition, poor fellow, for a mere abstraction?"

All this sneering has ever sounded mournfully in our ears, as a revelation of the unscrupulousness of the age. And to be called an abstractionist, has we confess, been always received rather as a compliment, than a reproach. It puts us in admirably good company;—along with all the profound thinkers, and the stable, noble souls, whose brave motto has been "*Obsta principiis.*" And when the philosophic historian shall come to write, in future ages, the history of the Decline and Fall of the

Empire Republic, he will mark it as the most glorious tribute to the public virtue of one school of our statesmen, that they were branded by unthinking or unscrupulous adversaries, as *Abstractionists*. And let none say, that in these words, we have violated that delicate neutrality towards national parties, which becomes a religious periodical. The honor of both the great parties of the nation, equally approves and demands the sentiment. For the sneer would have seemed as profligate and odious in the ears of a Hamilton or a Marshall, as in those of a Madison or a Calhoun.

“But, is there not a style of reasoning, which calls itself general and abstract, which is, in fact, unreliable, misty, and deceptive? This,” some will say, “is what we mean by abstractions.” Well, good reader, you express your meaning very unfortunately. When next you hear men using propositions, which they suppose general, in a manner vague and sophistical, we pray you, in the name of intelligence, sound logic, and sound principle, do not express your dissent, by saying that they are *abstractions*, say simply that they are *untrue*.