

CHAPTER II.

This doctrine had its rise not so very long--fifty years--ago. Its principal founder was the French savant Comte. There occurred to Comte,--a systematist, and a religious man to boot,--under the influence of the then novel physiological investigations of Biche, the old idea already set forth by Menenius Agrippa,--the idea that human society, all humanity even, might be regarded as one whole, as an organism; and men as living parts of the separate organs, having each his own definite appointment to serve the entire organism.

This idea so pleased Comte, that upon it he began to erect a philosophical theory; and this theory so carried him away, that he utterly forgot that the point of departure for his theory was nothing more than a very pretty comparison, which was suitable for a fable, but which could by no means serve as the foundation for science. He, as frequently happens, mistook his pet hypothesis for an axiom, and imagined that his whole theory was erected on the very firmest of foundations. According to his theory, it seemed that since humanity is an organism, the knowledge of what man is, and of what should be his relations to the world, was possible only through a knowledge of the features of this organism. For the knowledge of these qualities, man is enabled to take observations on other and lower organisms, and to draw conclusions from their life. Therefore, in the first place, the true and only method, according to Comte, is the inductive, and all science is only such when

it has experiment as its basis; in the second place, the goal and crown of sciences is formed by that new science dealing with the imaginary organism of humanity, or the super-organic being,--humanity,--and this newly devised science is sociology.

And from this view of science it appears, that all previous knowledge was deceitful, and that the whole story of humanity, in the sense of self-knowledge, has been divided into three, actually into two, periods: the theological and metaphysical period, extending from the beginning of the world to Comte, and the present period,--that of the only true science, positive science,--beginning with Comte.

All this was very well. There was but one error, and that was this,--that the whole edifice was erected on the sand, on the arbitrary and false assertion that humanity is an organism. This assertion was arbitrary, because we have just as much right to admit the existence of a human organism, not subject to observation, as we have to admit the existence of any other invisible, fantastic being. This assertion was erroneous, because for the understanding of humanity, i.e., of men, the definition of an organism was incorrectly constructed, while in humanity itself all actual signs of organism,--the centre of feeling or consciousness, are lacking. {178}

But, in spite of the arbitrariness and incorrectness of the fundamental assumption of positive philosophy, it was accepted by the so-called cultivated world with the greatest sympathy. In this connection, one

thing is worthy of note: that out of the works of Comte, consisting of two parts, of positive philosophy and of positive politics, only the first was adopted by the learned world,--that part which justifieth, on new promises, the existent evil of human societies; but the second part, treating of the moral obligations of altruism, arising from the recognition of mankind as an organism, was regarded as not only of no importance, but as trivial and unscientific. It was a repetition of the same thing that had happened in the case of Kant's works. The "Critique of Pure Reason" was adopted by the scientific crowd; but the "Critique of Applied Reason," that part which contains the gist of moral doctrine, was repudiated. In Kant's doctrine, that was accepted as scientific which subserved the existent evil. But the positive philosophy, which was accepted by the crowd, was founded on an arbitrary and erroneous basis, was in itself too unfounded, and therefore unsteady, and could not support itself alone. And so, amid all the multitude of the idle plays of thought of the men professing the so-called science, there presents itself an assertion equally devoid of novelty, and equally arbitrary and erroneous, to the effect that living beings, i.e., organisms, have had their rise in each other,--not only one organism from another, but one from many; i.e., that in a very long interval of time (in a million of years, for instance), not only could a duck and a fish proceed from one ancestor, but that one animal might result from a whole hive of bees. And this arbitrary and erroneous assumption was accepted by the learned world with still greater and more universal sympathy. This assumption was arbitrary, because no one has ever seen how one organism is made from another, and therefore the hypothesis as to the origin of species will

always remain an hypothesis, and not an experimental fact. And this hypothesis was also erroneous, because the decision of the question as to the origin of species--that they have originated, in consequence of the law of heredity and fitness, in the course of an interminably long time--is no solution at all, but merely a re-statement of the problem in a new form.

According to Moses' solution of the question (in the dispute with whom the entire significance of this theory lies), it appears that the diversity of the species of living creatures proceeded according to the will of God, and according to His almighty power; but according to the theory of evolution, it appears that the difference between living creatures arose by chance, and on account of varying conditions of heredity and surroundings, through an endless period of time. The theory of evolution, to speak in simple language, merely asserts, that by chance, in an incalculably long period of time, out of any thing you like, any thing else that you like may develop.

This is no answer to the problem. And the same problem is differently expressed: instead of will, chance is offered, and the co-efficient of the eternal is transposed from the power to the time. But this fresh assertion strengthened Comte's assertion. And, moreover, according to the ingenuous confession of the founder of Darwin's theory himself, his idea was aroused in him by the law of Malthus; and he therefore propounded the theory of the struggle of living creatures and people for existence, as the fundamental law of every living thing. And lo! only

this was needed by the throng of idle people for their justification.

Two insecure theories, incapable of sustaining themselves on their feet, upheld each other, and acquired the semblance of stability. Both theories bore with them that idea which is precious to the crowd, that in the existent evil of human societies, men are not to blame, and that the existing order of things is that which should prevail; and the new theory was adopted by the throng with entire faith and unheard-of enthusiasm. And behold, on the strength of these two arbitrary and erroneous hypotheses, accepted as dogmas of belief, the new scientific doctrine was ratified.

Spencer, for example, in one of his first works, expresses this doctrine thus:--

"Societies and organisms," he says, "are alike in the following points:--

"1. In that, beginning as tiny aggregates, they imperceptibly grow in mass, so that some of them attain to the size of ten thousand times their original bulk.

"2. In that while they were, in the beginning, of such simple structure, that they can be regarded as destitute of all structure, they acquire during the period of their growth a constantly increasing complication of structure.

"3. In that although in their early, undeveloped period, there exists between them hardly any interdependence of parts, their parts gradually acquire an interdependence, which eventually becomes so strong, that the life and activity of each part becomes possible only on condition of the life and activity of the remaining parts.

"4. In that life and the development of society are independent, and more protracted than the life and development of any one of the units constituting it, which are born, grow, act, reproduce themselves, and die separately; while the political body formed from them, continues to live generation after generation, developing in mass in perfection and functional activity."

The points of difference between organisms and society go farther; and it is proved that these differences are merely apparent, but that organisms and societies are absolutely similar.

For the uninitiated man the question immediately presents itself: "What are you talking about? Why is mankind an organism, or similar to an organism?"

You say that societies resemble organisms in these four features; but it is nothing of the sort. You only take a few features of the organism, and beneath them you range human communities. You bring forward four features of resemblance, then you take four features of dissimilarity, which are, however, only apparent (according to you); and you thence

conclude that human societies can be regarded as organisms. But surely, this is an empty game of dialectics, and nothing more. On the same foundation, under the features of an organism, you may range whatever you please. I will take the first thing that comes into my head. Let us suppose it to be a forest,--the manner in which it sows itself in the plain, and spreads abroad. 1. Beginning with a small aggregate, it increases imperceptibly in mass, and so forth. Exactly the same thing takes place in the fields, when they gradually seed themselves down, and bring forth a forest. 2. In the beginning the structure is simple: afterwards it increases in complication, and so forth. Exactly the same thing happens with the forest,--in the first place, there were only birch-trees, then came brush-wood and hazel-bushes; at first all grow erect, then they interlace their branches. 3. The interdependence of the parts is so augmented, that the life of each part depends on the life and activity of the remaining parts. It is precisely so with the forest,--the hazel-bush warms the tree-boles (cut it down, and the other trees will freeze), the hazel-bush protects from the wind, the seed-bearing trees carry on reproduction, the tall and leafy trees afford shade, and the life of one tree depends on the life of another. 4. The separate parts may die, but the whole lives. Exactly the case with the forest. The forest does not mourn one tree.

Having proved that, in accordance with this theory, you may regard the forest as an organism, you fancy that you have proved to the disciples of the organic doctrine the error of their definition. Nothing of the sort. The definition which they give to the organism is so inaccurate and so

elastic that under this definition they may include what they will.

"Yes," they say; "and the forest may also be regarded as an organism. The forest is mutual re-action of individuals, which do not annihilate each other,--an aggregate; its parts may also enter into a more intimate union, as the hive of bees constitutes itself an organism." Then you will say, "If that is so, then the birds and the insects and the grass of this forest, which re-act upon each other, and do not destroy each other, may also be regarded as one organism, in company with the trees." And to this also they will agree. Every collection of living individuals, which re-act upon each other, and do not destroy each other, may be regarded as organisms, according to their theory. You may affirm a connection and interaction between whatever you choose, and, according to evolution, you may affirm, that, out of whatever you please, any other thing that you please may proceed, in a very long period of time.

And the most remarkable thing of all is, that this same identical positive science recognizes the scientific method as the sign of true knowledge, and has itself defined what it designates as the scientific method.

By the scientific method it means common-sense.

And common-sense convicts it at every step. As soon as the Popes felt that nothing holy remained in them, they called themselves most holy.

As soon as science felt that no common-sense was left in her she called

herself sensible, that is to say, scientific science.