

Chapter IV.

Of The Requisites Of A Philosophical Language, And The Principles Of Definition.

§ 1. In order that we may possess a language perfectly suitable for the investigation and expression of general truths, there are two principal, and several minor requisites. The first is, that every general name should have a meaning, steadily fixed, and precisely determined. When, by the fulfillment of this condition, such names as we possess are fitted for the due performance of their functions, the next requisite, and the second in order of importance, is that we should possess a name wherever one is needed; wherever there is any thing to be designated by it, which it is of importance to express.

The former of these requisites is that to which our attention will be exclusively directed in the present chapter.

§ 2. Every general name, then, must have a certain and knowable meaning. Now the meaning (as has so often been explained) of a general connotative name, resides in the connotation; in the attribute on account of which, and to express which, the name is given. Thus, the name animal being given to all things which possess the attributes of sensation and voluntary motion, the word connotes those attributes exclusively, and they constitute the whole of its meaning. If the name be abstract, its denotation is the same with the connotation of the corresponding concrete; it designates directly the attribute, which the concrete term implies. To give a precise meaning to general names is, then, to fix with steadiness the attribute or attributes connoted by each concrete general name, and denoted by the corresponding abstract. Since abstract names, in the order of their creation, do not precede but follow concrete ones, as is proved by the etymological fact that they are almost always derived from them; we may consider their meaning as determined by, and dependent on, the meaning of their concrete; and thus the problem of giving a distinct meaning to general language, is all included in that of giving a precise connotation to all concrete general names.

This is not difficult in the case of new names; of the technical terms created by scientific inquirers for the purposes of science or art. But when a name is in common use, the difficulty is greater; the problem in this case not being that of choosing a convenient connotation for the name, but of ascertaining and fixing the connotation with which it is already used. That this can ever be a matter of doubt, is a sort of paradox. But the vulgar (including in that term all who have not accurate habits of thought) seldom know exactly what assertion they intend to make, what common property they mean to express, when they apply the same name to a number of different things. All which the name expresses with them, when they predicate it of an object, is a confused feeling of resemblance between that object and some of the other things which they have been accustomed to denote by the name. They have applied the name Stone to various objects previously seen; they see a new object, which appears to them somewhat like the former, and they call it a stone, without asking themselves in what respect it is like, or what mode or degree of resemblance the best authorities, or even they themselves, require as a warrant for using the name. This rough general impression of resemblance is, however, made up of particular circumstances of resemblance; and into these it is the business of the logician to analyze it; to ascertain what points of resemblance among the different things commonly called by the name, have produced in the common mind this vague feeling of likeness; have given to the things the similarity of aspect, which has made them a class, and has caused the same name to be bestowed upon them.

But though general names are imposed by the vulgar without any more definite connotation than that of a vague resemblance; general propositions come in time to be made, in which predicates are applied to those names, that is, general assertions are made concerning the *whole* of the things which are denoted by the name. And since by each of these propositions some attribute, more or less precisely conceived, is of course predicated, the ideas of these various attributes thus become associated with the name, and in a sort of uncertain way it comes to connote them; there is a hesitation to apply the name in any new case in which any of the attributes familiarly predicated of the class do not exist. And thus, to common minds, the propositions which they are in the habit of hearing or uttering concerning a class make up in a loose way a sort of connotation for the class name. Let us take, for instance, the word Civilized. How few could be found, even

among the most educated persons, who would undertake to say exactly what the term *Civilized* connotes. Yet there is a feeling in the minds of all who use it, that they are using it with a meaning; and this meaning is made up, in a confused manner, of every thing which they have heard or read that civilized men or civilized communities are, or may be expected to be.

It is at this stage, probably, in the progress of a concrete name, that the corresponding abstract name generally comes into use. Under the notion that the concrete name must of course convey a meaning, or, in other words, that there is some property common to all things which it denotes, people give a name to this common property; from the concrete *Civilized*, they form the abstract *Civilization*. But since most people have never compared the different things which are called by the concrete name, in such a manner as to ascertain what properties these things have in common, or whether they have any; each is thrown back upon the marks by which he himself has been accustomed to be guided in his application of the term; and these, being merely vague hearsays and current phrases, are not the same in any two persons, nor in the same person at different times. Hence the word (as *Civilization*, for example) which professes to be the designation of the unknown common property, conveys scarcely to any two minds the same idea. No two persons agree in the things they predicate of it; and when it is itself predicated of any thing, no other person knows, nor does the speaker himself know with precision, what he means to assert. Many other words which could be named, as the word *honor*, or the word *gentleman*, exemplify this uncertainty still more strikingly.

It needs scarcely be observed, that general propositions of which no one can tell exactly what they assert, can not possibly have been brought to the test of a correct induction. Whether a name is to be used as an instrument of thinking, or as a means of communicating the result of thought, it is imperative to determine exactly the attribute or attributes which it is to express; to give it, in short, a fixed and ascertained connotation.

§ 3. It would, however, be a complete misunderstanding of the proper office of a logician in dealing with terms already in use, if we were to think that because a name has not at present an ascertained connotation, it is competent to any one to give it such a connotation at his own choice. The meaning of a term actually in use is not an arbitrary quantity to be fixed, but an unknown quantity to be sought.

In the first place, it is obviously desirable to avail ourselves, as far as possible, of the associations already connected with the name; not enjoining the employment of it in a manner which conflicts with all previous habits, and especially not so as to require the rupture of those strongest of all associations between names, which are created by familiarity with propositions in which they are predicated of one another. A philosopher would have little chance of having his example followed, if he were to give such a meaning to his terms as should require us to call the North American Indians a civilized people, or the higher classes in Europe savages; or to say that civilized people live by hunting, and savages by agriculture. Were there no other reason, the extreme difficulty of effecting so complete a revolution in speech would be more than a sufficient one. The endeavor should be, that all generally received propositions into which the term enters, should be at least as true after its meaning is fixed, as they were before; and that the concrete name, therefore, should not receive such a connotation as shall prevent it from denoting things which, in common language, it is currently affirmed of. The fixed and precise connotation which it receives should not be in deviation from, but in agreement (as far as it goes) with, the vague and fluctuating connotation which the term already had.

To fix the connotation of a concrete name, or the denotation of the corresponding abstract, is to define the name. When this can be done without rendering any received assertions inadmissible, the name can be defined in accordance with its received use, which is vulgarly called defining not the name but the thing. What is meant by the improper expression of defining a thing (or rather a class of things--for nobody talks of defining an individual), is to define the name, subject to the condition that it shall denote those things. This, of course, supposes a comparison of the things, feature by feature and property by property, to ascertain what attributes they agree in; and not unfrequently an operation strictly inductive, for the purpose of ascertaining some unobvious agreement, which is the cause of the obvious agreements.

For, in order to give a connotation to a name, consistently with its denoting certain objects, we have to make our selection from among the various attributes in which those objects agree. To ascertain in what they do agree is, therefore, the first logical operation requisite. When this has been done as far as is necessary or practicable, the question arises, which of these common attributes shall be selected to be associated with the name. For if the class which the name denotes be a Kind, the common properties are innumerable; and even if not, they are often extremely numerous. Our choice is first limited by the preference to be given to properties which are well known, and familiarly predicated of the class; but even these are often too numerous to be all included in the definition, and, besides, the properties most generally known may not be those which serve best to mark out the class from all others. We should therefore select from among the common properties (if among them any such are to be found) those on which it has been ascertained by experience, or proved by deduction, that many others depend; or at least which are sure marks of them, and from whence, therefore, many others will follow by inference. We thus see that to frame a good definition of a name already in use, is not a matter of choice but of discussion, and discussion not merely respecting the usage of language, but respecting the properties of things, and even the origin of those properties. And hence every enlargement of our knowledge of the objects to which the name is applied, is liable to suggest an improvement in the definition. It is impossible to frame a perfect set of definitions on any subject, until the theory of the subject is perfect; and as science makes progress, its definitions are also progressive.

§ 4. The discussion of Definitions, in so far as it does not turn on the use of words but on the properties of things, Dr. Whewell calls the Explication of Conceptions. The act of ascertaining, better than before, in what particulars any phenomena which are classed together agree, he calls in his technical phraseology, unfolding the general conception in virtue of which they are so classed. Making allowance for what appears to me the darkening and misleading tendency of this mode of expression, several of his remarks are so much to the purpose, that I shall take the liberty of transcribing them.

He observes,(213) that many of the controversies which have had an important share in the formation of the existing body of science, have "assumed the form of a battle of Definitions. For example, the inquiry concerning the laws of falling bodies led to the question whether the proper definition of a *uniform force* is that it generates a velocity proportional to the *space* from rest, or to the *time*. The controversy of the *vis viva* was what was the proper definition of the *measure of force*. A principal question in the classification of minerals is, what is the definition of a *mineral species*. Physiologists have endeavored to throw light on their subject by defining *organization*, or some similar term." Questions of the same nature were long open and are not yet completely closed, respecting the definitions of Specific Heat, Latent Heat, Chemical Combination, and Solution.

"It is very important for us to observe, that these controversies have never been questions of insulated and *arbitrary* definitions, as men seem often tempted to imagine them to have been. In all cases there is a tacit assumption of some proposition which is to be expressed by means of the definition, and which gives it its importance. The dispute concerning the definition thus acquires a real value, and becomes a question concerning true and false. Thus, in the discussion of the question, What is a uniform force? it was taken for granted that gravity is a uniform force. In the debate of the *vis viva*, it was assumed that in the mutual action of bodies the whole effect of the force is unchanged. In the zoological definition of species (that it consists of individuals which have, or may have, sprung from the same parents), it is presumed that individuals so related resemble each other more than those which are excluded by such a definition; or, perhaps, that species so defined have permanent and definite differences. A definition of organization, or of some other term which was not employed to express some principle, would be of no value.

"The establishment, therefore, of a right definition of a term, may be a useful step in the explication of our conceptions; but this will be the case then only when we have under our consideration some proposition in which the term is employed. For then the question really is, how the conception shall be understood and defined in order that the proposition may be true.

"To unfold our conceptions by means of definitions has never been serviceable to science, except when it has been associated with an immediate use of the definitions. The endeavor to define a Uniform Force was combined with the assertion that gravity is a uniform force; the attempt to define Accelerating Force was immediately followed by the doctrine that accelerating forces may be compounded; the process of defining Momentum was connected with the principle that momenta gained and lost are equal; naturalists would have given in vain the definition of Species which we have quoted, if they had not also given the characters of species so separated.... Definition may be the best mode of explaining our conception, but that which alone makes it worth while to explain it in any mode, is the opportunity of using it in the expression of truth. When a definition is propounded to us as a useful step in knowledge, we are always entitled to ask what principle it serves to enunciate."

In giving, then, an exact connotation to the phrase, "a uniform force," the condition was understood, that the phrase should continue to denote gravity. The discussion, therefore, respecting the definition, resolved itself into this question, What is there of a uniform nature in the motions produced by gravity? By observations and comparisons, it was found that what was uniform in those motions was the ratio of the velocity acquired to the time elapsed; equal velocities being added in equal times. A uniform force, therefore, was defined a force which adds equal velocities in equal times. So, again, in defining momentum. It was already a received doctrine that, when two objects impinge upon one another, the momentum lost by the one is equal to that gained by the other. This proposition it was deemed necessary to preserve, not from the motive (which operates in many other cases) that it was firmly fixed in popular belief; for the proposition in question had never been heard of by any but the scientifically instructed. But it was felt to contain a truth; even a superficial observation of the phenomena left no doubt that in the propagation of motion from one body to another, there was something of which the one body gained precisely what the other lost; and the word momentum had been invented to express this unknown something. The settlement, therefore, of the definition of momentum, involved the determination of the question, What is that of which a body, when it sets another body in motion, loses exactly as much as it communicates? And when experiment had shown that this *something* was the product of the velocity of the body by its mass, or quantity of matter, this became the definition of momentum.

The following remarks,(214) therefore, are perfectly just: "The business of definition is part of the business of discovery.... To define, so that our definition shall have any scientific value, requires no small portion of that sagacity by which truth is detected.... When it has been clearly seen what ought to be our definition, it must be pretty well known what truth we have to state. The definition, as well as the discovery, supposes a decided step in our knowledge to have been made. The writers on Logic, in the Middle Ages, made Definition the last stage in the progress of knowledge; and in this arrangement at least, the history of science, and the philosophy derived from the history, confirm their speculative views." For in order to judge finally how the name which denotes a class may best be defined, we must know all the properties common to the class, and all the relations of causation or dependence among those properties.

If the properties which are fittest to be selected as marks of other common properties are also obvious and familiar, and especially if they bear a great part in producing that general air of resemblance which was the original inducement to the formation of the class, the definition will then be most felicitous. But it is often necessary to define the class by some property not familiarly known, provided that property be the best mark of those which are known. M. De Blainville, for instance, founded his definition of life on the process of decomposition and recomposition which incessantly takes place in every living body, so that the particles composing it are never for two instants the same. This is by no means one of the most obvious properties of living bodies; it might escape altogether the notice of an unscientific observer. Yet great authorities (independently of M. De Blainville, who is himself a first-rate authority) have thought that no other property so well answers the conditions required for the definition.

§ 5. Having laid down the principles which ought for the most part to be observed in attempting to give a precise connotation to a term in use, I must now add, that it is not always practicable to adhere to those

principles, and that even when practicable, it is occasionally not desirable.

Cases in which it is impossible to comply with all the conditions of a precise definition of a name in agreement with usage, occur very frequently. There is often no one connotation capable of being given to a word, so that it shall still denote every thing it is accustomed to denote; or that all the propositions into which it is accustomed to enter, and which have any foundation in truth, shall remain true. Independently of accidental ambiguities, in which the different meanings have no connection with one another; it continually happens that a word is used in two or more senses derived from each other, but yet radically distinct. So long as a term is vague, that is, so long as its connotation is not ascertained and permanently fixed, it is constantly liable to be applied by *extension* from one thing to another, until it reaches things which have little, or even no, resemblance to those which were first designated by it.

"Suppose," says Dugald Stewart, in his *Philosophical Essays*,(215) "that the letters A, B, C, D, E, denote a series of objects; that A possesses some one quality in common with B; B a quality in common with C; C a quality in common with D; D a quality in common with E; while at the same time, no quality can be found which belongs in common to any *three* objects in the series. Is it not conceivable, that the affinity between A and B may produce a transference of the name of the first to the second; and that, in consequence of the other affinities which connect the remaining objects together, the same name may pass in succession from B to C; from C to D; and from D to E? In this manner, a common appellation will arise between A and E, although the two objects may, in their nature and properties, be so widely distant from each other, that no stretch of imagination can conceive how the thoughts were led from the former to the latter. The transitions, nevertheless, may have been all so easy and gradual, that, were they successfully detected by the fortunate ingenuity of a theorist, we should instantly recognize, not only the verisimilitude, but the truth of the conjecture: in the same way as we admit, with the confidence of intuitive conviction, the certainty of the well-known etymological process which connects the Latin preposition *e* or *ex* with the English substantive *stranger*, the moment that the intermediate links of the chain are submitted to our examination."(216)

The applications which a word acquires by this gradual extension of it from one set of objects to another, Stewart, adopting an expression from Mr. Payne Knight, calls its *transitive* applications; and after briefly illustrating such of them as are the result of local or casual associations, he proceeds as follows:(217)

"But although by far the greater part of the transitive or derivative applications of words depend on casual and unaccountable caprices of the feelings or the fancy, there are certain cases in which they open a very interesting field of philosophical speculation. Such are those, in which an analogous transference of the corresponding term may be remarked universally, or very generally, in other languages; and in which, of course, the uniformity of the result must be ascribed to the essential principles of the human frame. Even in such cases, however, it will by no means be always found, on examination, that the various applications of the same term have arisen from any common quality or qualities in the objects to which they relate. In the greater number of instances, they may be traced to some natural and universal associations of ideas, founded in the common faculties, common organs, and common condition of the human race.... According to the different degrees of intimacy and strength in the associations on which the *transitions* of language are founded, very different effects may be expected to arise. Where the association is slight and casual, the several meanings will remain distinct from each other, and will often, in process of time, assume the appearance of capricious varieties in the use of the same arbitrary sign. *Where the association is so natural and habitual as to become virtually indissoluble, the transitive meanings will coalesce in one complex conception; and every new transition will become a more comprehensive generalization of the term in question.*"

I solicit particular attention to the law of mind expressed in the last sentence, and which is the source of the perplexity so often experienced in detecting these transitions of meaning. Ignorance of that law is the shoal on which some of the most powerful intellects which have adorned the human race have been stranded. The inquiries of Plato into the definitions of some of the most general terms of moral speculation are characterized by Bacon as a far nearer approach to a true inductive method than is elsewhere to be found among the

ancients, and are, indeed, almost perfect examples of the preparatory process of comparison and abstraction; but, from being unaware of the law just mentioned, he often wasted the powers of this great logical instrument on inquiries in which it could realize no result, since the phenomena, whose common properties he so elaborately endeavored to detect, had not really any common properties. Bacon himself fell into the same error in his speculations on the nature of heat, in which he evidently confounded under the name hot, classes of phenomena which have no property in common. Stewart certainly overstates the matter when he speaks of "a prejudice which has descended to modern times from the scholastic ages, that when a word admits of a variety of significations, these different significations must all be species of the same genus, and must consequently include some essential idea common to every individual to which the generic term can be applied;"(218) for both Aristotle and his followers were well aware that there are such things as ambiguities of language, and delighted in distinguishing them. But they never suspected ambiguity in the cases where (as Stewart remarks) the association on which the transition of meaning was founded is so natural and habitual, that the two meanings blend together in the mind, and a real transition becomes an apparent generalization. Accordingly they wasted infinite pains in endeavoring to find a definition which would serve for several distinct meanings at once; as in an instance noticed by Stewart himself, that of "causation; the ambiguity of the word which, in the Greek language corresponds to the English word *cause*, having suggested to them the vain attempt of tracing the common idea which, in the case of any *effect*, belongs to the *efficient*, to the *matter*, to the *form*, and to the *end*. The idle generalities" (he adds) "we meet with in other philosophers, about the ideas of the *good*, the *fit*, and the *becoming*, have taken their rise from the same undue influence of popular epithets on the speculations of the learned."(219)

Among the words which have undergone so many successive transitions of meaning that every trace of a property common to all the things they are applied to, or at least common and also peculiar to those things, has been lost, Stewart considers the word Beautiful to be one. And (without attempting to decide a question which in no respect belongs to logic) I can not but feel, with him, considerable doubt whether the word beautiful connotes the same property when we speak of a beautiful color, a beautiful face, a beautiful scene, a beautiful character, and a beautiful poem. The word was doubtless extended from one of these objects to another on account of a resemblance between them, or, more probably, between the emotions they excited; and, by this progressive extension, it has at last reached things very remote from those objects of sight to which there is no doubt that it was first appropriated; and it is at least questionable whether there is now any property common to all the things which, consistently with usage, may be called beautiful, except the property of agreeableness, which the term certainly does connote, but which can not be all that people usually intend to express by it, since there are many agreeable things which are never called beautiful. If such be the case, it is impossible to give to the word Beautiful any fixed connotation, such that it shall denote all the objects which in common use it now denotes, but no others. A fixed connotation, however, it ought to have; for, so long as it has not, it is unfit to be used as a scientific term, and is a perpetual source of false analogies and erroneous generalizations.

This, then, constitutes a case in exemplification of our remark, that even when there is a property common to all the things denoted by a name, to erect that property into the definition and exclusive connotation of the name is not always desirable. The various things called beautiful unquestionably resemble one another in being agreeable; but to make this the definition of beauty, and so extend the word Beautiful to all agreeable things, would be to drop altogether a portion of meaning which the word really, though indistinctly, conveys, and to do what depends on us toward causing those qualities of the objects which the word previously, though vaguely, pointed at, to be overlooked and forgotten. It is better, in such a case, to give a fixed connotation to the term by restricting, than by extending its use; rather excluding from the epithet Beautiful some things to which it is commonly considered applicable, than leaving out of its connotation any of the qualities by which, though occasionally lost sight of, the general mind may have been habitually guided in the commonest and most interesting applications of the term. For there is no question that when people call any thing beautiful, they think they are asserting more than that it is merely agreeable. They think they are ascribing a peculiar *sort* of agreeableness, analogous to that which they find in some other of the things to which they are accustomed to apply the same name. If, therefore, there be any peculiar sort of agreeableness which is

common though not to all, yet to the principal things which are called beautiful, it is better to limit the denotation of the term to those things, than to leave that kind of quality without a term to connote it, and thereby divert attention from its peculiarities.

§ 6. The last remark exemplifies a rule of terminology, which is of great importance, and which has hardly yet been recognized as a rule, but by a few thinkers of the present century. In attempting to rectify the use of a vague term by giving it a fixed connotation, we must take care not to discard (unless advisedly, and on the ground of a deeper knowledge of the subject) any portion of the connotation which the word, in however indistinct a manner, previously carried with it. For otherwise language loses one of its inherent and most valuable properties, that of being the conservator of ancient experience; the keeper-alive of those thoughts and observations of former ages, which may be alien to the tendencies of the passing time. This function of language is so often overlooked or undervalued, that a few observations on it appear to be extremely required.

Even when the connotation of a term has been accurately fixed, and still more if it has been left in the state of a vague unanalyzed feeling of resemblance; there is a constant tendency in the word, through familiar use, to part with a portion of its connotation. It is a well-known law of the mind, that a word originally associated with a very complex cluster of ideas, is far from calling up all those ideas in the mind, every time the word is used; it calls up only one or two, from which the mind runs on by fresh associations to another set of ideas, without waiting for the suggestion of the remainder of the complex cluster. If this were not the case, processes of thought could not take place with any thing like the rapidity which we know they possess. Very often, indeed, when we are employing a word in our mental operations, we are so far from waiting until the complex idea which corresponds to the meaning of the word is consciously brought before us in all its parts, that we run on to new trains of ideas by the other associations which the mere word excites, without having realized in our imagination any part whatever of the meaning; thus using the word, and even using it well and accurately, and carrying on important processes of reasoning by means of it, in an almost mechanical manner; so much so, that some metaphysicians, generalizing from an extreme case, have fancied that all reasoning is but the mechanical use of a set of terms according to a certain form. We may discuss and settle the most important interests of towns or nations, by the application of general theorems or practical maxims previously laid down, without having had consciously suggested to us, once in the whole process, the houses and green fields, the thronged market-places and domestic hearths, of which not only those towns and nations consist, but which the words town and nation confessedly mean.

Since, then, general names come in this manner to be used (and even to do a portion of their work well) without suggesting to the mind the whole of their meaning, and often with the suggestion of a very small, or no part at all of that meaning; we can not wonder that words so used come in time to be no longer capable of suggesting any other of the ideas appropriated to them, than those with which the association is most immediate and strongest, or most kept up by the incidents of life; the remainder being lost altogether; unless the mind, by often consciously dwelling on them, keeps up the association. Words naturally retain much more of their meaning to persons of active imagination, who habitually represent to themselves things in the concrete, with the detail which belongs to them in the actual world. To minds of a different description, the only antidote to this corruption of language is predication. The habit of predicating of the name, all the various properties which it originally connoted, keeps up the association between the name and those properties.

But in order that it may do so, it is necessary that the predicates should themselves retain their association with the properties which they severally connote. For the propositions can not keep the meaning of the words alive, if the meaning of the propositions themselves should die. And nothing is more common than for propositions to be mechanically repeated, mechanically retained in the memory, and their truth undoubtingly assented to and relied on, while yet they carry no meaning distinctly home to the mind; and while the matter of fact or law of nature which they originally expressed is as much lost sight of, and practically disregarded, as if it never had been heard of at all. In those subjects which are at the same time familiar and complicated, and especially in those which are so in as great a degree as moral and social subjects are, it is a matter of common remark how many important propositions are believed and repeated from habit, while no account

could be given, and no sense is practically manifested, of the truths which they convey. Hence it is, that the traditional maxims of old experience, though seldom questioned, have often so little effect on the conduct of life; because their meaning is never, by most persons, really felt, until personal experience has brought it home. And thus also it is that so many doctrines of religion, ethics, and even politics, so full of meaning and reality to first converts, have manifested (after the association of that meaning with the verbal formulas has ceased to be kept up by the controversies which accompanied their first introduction) a tendency to degenerate rapidly into lifeless dogmas; which tendency, all the efforts of an education expressly and skillfully directed to keeping the meaning alive, are barely sufficient to counteract.

Considering, then, that the human mind, in different generations, occupies itself with different things, and in one age is led by the circumstances which surround it to fix more of its attention upon one of the properties of a thing, in another age upon another; it is natural and inevitable that in every age a certain portion of our recorded and traditional knowledge, not being continually suggested by the pursuits and inquiries with which mankind are at that time engrossed, should fall asleep, as it were, and fade from the memory. It would be in danger of being totally lost, if the propositions or formulas, the results of the previous experience, did not remain, as forms of words it may be, but of words that once really conveyed, and are still supposed to convey, a meaning: which meaning, though suspended, may be historically traced, and when suggested, may be recognized by minds of the necessary endowments as being still matter of fact, or truth. While the formulas remain, the meaning may at any time revive; and as, on the one hand, the formulas progressively lose the meaning they were intended to convey, so, on the other, when this forgetfulness has reached its height and begun to produce obvious consequences, minds arise which from the contemplation of the formulas rediscover the truth, when truth it was, which was contained in them, and announce it again to mankind, not as a discovery, but as the meaning of that which they have been taught, and still profess to believe.

Thus there is a perpetual oscillation in spiritual truths, and in spiritual doctrines of any significance, even when not truths. Their meaning is almost always in a process either of being lost or of being recovered. Whoever has attended to the history of the more serious convictions of mankind--of the opinions by which the general conduct of their lives is, or as they conceive ought to be, more especially regulated--is aware that even when recognizing verbally the same doctrines, they attach to them at different periods a greater or a less quantity, and even a different kind of meaning. The words in their original acceptation connoted, and the propositions expressed, a complication of outward facts and inward feelings, to different portions of which the general mind is more particularly alive in different generations of mankind. To common minds, only that portion of the meaning is in each generation suggested, of which that generation possesses the counterpart in its own habitual experience. But the words and propositions lie ready to suggest to any mind duly prepared the remainder of the meaning. Such individual minds are almost always to be found; and the lost meaning, revived by them, again by degrees works its way into the general mind.

The arrival of this salutary reaction may, however, be materially retarded by the shallow conceptions and incautious proceedings of mere logicians. It sometimes happens that toward the close of the downward period, when the words have lost part of their significance, and have not yet begun to recover it, persons arise whose leading and favorite idea is the importance of clear conceptions and precise thought, and the necessity, therefore, of definite language. These persons, in examining the old formulas, easily perceive that words are used in them without a meaning; and if they are not the sort of persons who are capable of rediscovering the lost signification, they naturally enough dismiss the formula, and define the name without reference to it. In so doing they fasten down the name to what it connotes in common use at the time when it conveys the smallest quantity of meaning; and introduce the practice of employing it, consistently and uniformly, according to that connotation. The word in this way acquires an extent of denotation far beyond what it had before; it becomes extended to many things to which it was previously, in appearance capriciously, refused. Of the propositions in which it was formerly used, those which were true in virtue of the forgotten part of its meaning are now, by the clearer light which the definition diffuses, seen not to be true according to the definition; which, however, is the recognized and sufficiently correct expression of all that is perceived to be in the mind of any one by whom the term is used at the present day. The ancient formulas are consequently treated as prejudices; and

people are no longer taught as before, though not to understand them, yet to believe that there is truth in them. They no longer remain in the general mind surrounded by respect, and ready at any time to suggest their original meaning. Whatever truths they contain are not only, in these circumstances, rediscovered far more slowly, but, when rediscovered, the prejudice with which novelties are regarded is now, in some degree at least, against them, instead of being on their side.

An example may make these remarks more intelligible. In all ages, except where moral speculation has been silenced by outward compulsion, or where the feelings which prompt to it still continue to be satisfied by the traditional doctrines of an established faith, one of the subjects which have most occupied the minds of thinking persons is the inquiry, What is virtue? or, What is a virtuous character? Among the different theories on the subject which have, at different times, grown up and obtained partial currency, every one of which reflected as in the clearest mirror the express image of the age which gave it birth; there was one, according to which virtue consists in a correct calculation of our own personal interests, either in this world only, or also in another. To make this theory plausible, it was of course necessary that the only beneficial actions which people in general were accustomed to see, or were therefore accustomed to praise, should be such as were, or at least might without contradicting obvious facts be supposed to be, the result of a prudential regard to self-interest; so that the words really connoted no more, in common acceptance, than was set down in the definition.

Suppose, now, that the partisans of this theory had contrived to introduce a consistent and undeviating use of the term according to this definition. Suppose that they had seriously endeavored, and had succeeded in the endeavor, to banish the word disinterestedness from the language; had obtained the disuse of all expressions attaching odium to selfishness or commendation to self-sacrifice, or which implied generosity or kindness to be any thing but doing a benefit in order to receive a greater personal advantage in return. Need we say that this abrogation of the old formulas for the sake of preserving clear ideas and consistency of thought, would have been a great evil? while the very inconsistency incurred by the co-existence of the formulas with philosophical opinions which seemed to condemn them as absurdities, operated as a stimulus to the re-examination of the subject and thus the very doctrines originating in the oblivion into which a part of the truth had fallen, were rendered indirectly, but powerfully, instrumental to its revival.

The doctrine of the Coleridge school, that the language of any people among whom culture is of old date, is a sacred deposit, the property of all ages, and which no one age should consider itself empowered to alter--borders indeed, as thus expressed, on an extravagance; but it is grounded on a truth, frequently overlooked by that class of logicians who think more of having a clear than of having a comprehensive meaning; and who perceive that every age is adding to the truths which it has received from its predecessors, but fail to see that a counter process of losing truths already possessed, is also constantly going on, and requiring the most sedulous attention to counteract it. Language is the depository of the accumulated body of experience to which all former ages have contributed their part, and which is the inheritance of all yet to come. We have no right to prevent ourselves from transmitting to posterity a larger portion of this inheritance than we may ourselves have profited by. However much we may be able to improve on the conclusions of our forefathers, we ought to be careful not inadvertently to let any of their premises slip through our fingers. It may be good to alter the meaning of a word, but it is bad to let any part of the meaning drop. Whoever seeks to introduce a more correct use of a term with which important associations are connected, should be required to possess an accurate acquaintance with the history of the particular word, and of the opinions which in different stages of its progress it served to express. To be qualified to define the name, we must know all that has ever been known of the properties of the class of objects which are, or originally were, denoted by it. For if we give it a meaning according to which any proposition will be false which has ever been generally held to be true, it is incumbent on us to be sure that we know and have considered all which those who believed the proposition understood by it.