

Chapter XI.

Additional Elucidations Of The Science Of History.

§ 1. The doctrine which the preceding chapters were intended to enforce and elucidate--that the collective series of social phenomena, in other words the course of history, is subject to general laws, which philosophy may possibly detect--has been familiar for generations to the scientific thinkers of the Continent, and has for the last quarter of a century passed out of their peculiar domain, into that of newspapers and ordinary political discussion. In our own country, however, at the time of the first publication of this Treatise, it was almost a novelty, and the prevailing habits of thought on historical subjects were the very reverse of a preparation for it. Since then a great change has taken place, and has been eminently promoted by the important work of Mr. Buckle; who, with characteristic energy, flung down this great principle, together with many striking exemplifications of it, into the arena of popular discussion, to be fought over by a sort of combatants, in the presence of a sort of spectators, who would never even have been aware that there existed such a principle if they had been left to learn its existence from the speculations of pure science. And hence has arisen a considerable amount of controversy, tending not only to make the principle rapidly familiar to the majority of cultivated minds, but also to clear it from the confusions and misunderstandings by which it was but natural that it should for a time be clouded, and which impair the worth of the doctrine to those who accept it, and are the stumbling-block of many who do not.

Among the impediments to the general acknowledgment, by thoughtful minds, of the subjection of historical facts to scientific laws, the most fundamental continues to be that which is grounded on the doctrine of Free Will, or, in other words, on the denial that the law of invariable Causation holds true of human volitions; for if it does not, the course of history, being the result of human volitions, can not be a subject of scientific laws, since the volitions on which it depends can neither be foreseen, nor reduced to any canon of regularity even after they have occurred. I have discussed this question, as far as seemed suitable to the occasion, in a former chapter; and I only think it necessary to repeat, that the doctrine of the Causation of human actions, improperly called the doctrine of Necessity, affirms no mysterious *nexus*, or overruling fatality: it asserts only that men's actions are the joint result of the general laws and circumstances of human nature, and of their own particular characters; those characters again being the consequence of the natural and artificial circumstances that constituted their education, among which circumstances must be reckoned their own conscious efforts. Any one who is willing to take (if the expression may be permitted) the trouble of thinking himself into the doctrine as thus stated, will find it, I believe, not only a faithful interpretation of the universal experience of human conduct, but a correct representation of the mode in which he himself, in every particular case, spontaneously interprets his own experience of that conduct.

But if this principle is true of individual man, it must be true of collective man. If it is the law of human life, the law must be realized in history. The experience of human affairs when looked at *en masse*, must be in accordance with it if true, or repugnant to it if false. The support which this *a posteriori* verification affords to the law, is the part of the case which has been most clearly and triumphantly brought out by Mr. Buckle.

The facts of statistics, since they have been made a subject of careful recordation and study, have yielded conclusions, some of which have been very startling to persons not accustomed to regard moral actions as subject to uniform laws. The very events which in their own nature appear most capricious and uncertain, and which in any individual case no attainable degree of knowledge would enable us to foresee, occur, when considerable numbers are taken into the account, with a degree of regularity approaching to mathematical. What act is there which all would consider as more completely dependent on individual character, and on the exercise of individual free will, than that of slaying a fellow-creature? Yet in any large country, the number of murders, in proportion to the population, varies (it has been found) very little from one year to another, and in its variations never deviates widely from a certain average. What is still more remarkable, there is a similar approach to constancy in the proportion of these murders annually committed with every particular kind of instrument. There is a like approximation to identity, as between one year and another, in the comparative

number of legitimate and of illegitimate births. The same thing is found true of suicides, accidents, and all other social phenomena of which the registration is sufficiently perfect; one of the most curiously illustrative examples being the fact, ascertained by the registers of the London and Paris post-offices, that the number of letters posted which the writers have forgotten to direct, is nearly the same, in proportion to the whole number of letters posted, in one year as in another. "Year after year," says Mr. Buckle, "the same proportion of letter-writers forget this simple act; so that for each successive period we can actually foretell the number of persons whose memory will fail them in regard to this trifling, and as it might appear, accidental occurrence."(283)

This singular degree of regularity *en masse*, combined with the extreme of irregularity in the cases composing the mass, is a felicitous verification *a posteriori* of the law of causation in its application to human conduct. Assuming the truth of that law, every human action, every murder, for instance, is the concurrent result of two sets of causes. On the one part, the general circumstances of the country and its inhabitants; the moral, educational, economical, and other influences operating on the whole people, and constituting what we term the state of civilization. On the other part, the great variety of influences special to the individual: his temperament, and other peculiarities of organization, his parentage, habitual associates, temptations, and so forth. If we now take the whole of the instances which occur within a sufficiently large field to exhaust all the combinations of these special influences, or, in other words, to eliminate chance; and if all these instances have occurred within such narrow limits of time, that no material change can have taken place in the general influences constituting the state of civilization of the country; we may be certain, that if human actions are governed by invariable laws, the aggregate result will be something like a constant quantity. The number of murders committed within that space and time, being the effect partly of general causes which have not varied, and partly of partial causes the whole round of whose variations has been included, will be, practically speaking, invariable.

Literally and mathematically invariable it is not, and could not be expected to be: because the period of a year is too short to include *all* the possible combinations of partial causes, while it is, at the same time, sufficiently long to make it probable that in some years at least, of every series, there will have been introduced new influences of a more or less general character; such as a more vigorous or a more relaxed police; some temporary excitement from political or religious causes; or some incident generally notorious, of a nature to act morbidly on the imagination. That in spite of these unavoidable imperfections in the data, there should be so very trifling a margin of variation in the annual results, is a brilliant continuation of the general theory.

§ 2. The same considerations which thus strikingly corroborate the evidence of the doctrine, that historical facts are the invariable effects of causes, tend equally to clear that doctrine from various misapprehensions, the existence of which has been put in evidence by the recent discussions. Some persons, for instance, seemingly imagine the doctrine to imply, not merely that the total number of murders committed in a given space and time is entirely the effect of the general circumstances of society, but that every particular murder is so too--that the individual murderer is, so to speak, a mere instrument in the hands of general causes that he himself has no option, or, if he has, and chose to exercise it, some one else would be necessitated to take his place; that if any one of the actual murderers had abstained from the crime, some person who would otherwise have remained innocent, would have committed an extra murder to make up the average. Such a corollary would certainly convict any theory which necessarily led to it of absurdity. It is obvious, however, that each particular murder depends, not on the general state of society only, but on that combined with causes special to the case, which are generally much more powerful; and if these special causes, which have greater influence than the general ones in causing every particular murder, have no influence on the number of murders in a given period, it is because the field of observation is so extensive as to include all possible combinations of the special causes--all varieties of individual character and individual temptation compatible with the general state of society. The collective experiment, as it may be termed, exactly separates the effect of the general from that of the special causes, and shows the net result of the former; but it declares nothing at all respecting the amount of influence of the special causes, be it greater or smaller, since the scale of the experiment extends to the number of cases within which the effects of the special causes balance one another,

and disappear in that of the general causes.

I will not pretend that all the defenders of the theory have always kept their language free from this same confusion, and have shown no tendency to exalt the influence of general causes at the expense of special. I am of opinion, on the contrary, that they have done so in a very great degree, and by so doing have encumbered their theory with difficulties, and laid it open to objections, which do not necessarily affect it. Some, for example (among whom is Mr. Buckle himself), have inferred, or allowed it to be supposed that they inferred, from the regularity in the recurrence of events which depend on moral qualities, that the moral qualities of mankind are little capable of being improved, or are of little importance in the general progress of society, compared with intellectual or economic causes. But to draw this inference is to forget that the statistical tables, from which the invariable averages are deduced, were compiled from facts occurring within narrow geographical limits and in a small number of successive years; that is, from a field the whole of which was under the operation of the same general causes, and during too short a time to allow of much change therein. All moral causes but those common to the country generally, have been eliminated by the great number of instances taken; and those which are common to the whole country have not varied considerably, in the short space of time comprised in the observations. If we admit the supposition that they have varied; if we compare one age with another, or one country with another, or even one part of a country with another, differing in position and character as to the moral elements, the crimes committed within a year give no longer the same, but a widely different numerical aggregate. And this can not but be the case: for, inasmuch as every single crime committed by an individual mainly depends on his moral qualities, the crimes committed by the entire population of the country must depend in an equal degree on their collective moral qualities. To render this element inoperative upon the large scale, it would be necessary to suppose that the general moral average of mankind does not vary from country to country or from age to age; which is not true, and, even if it were true, could not possibly be proved by any existing statistics. I do not on this account the less agree in the opinion of Mr. Buckle, that the intellectual element in mankind, including in that expression the nature of their beliefs, the amount of their knowledge, and the development of their intelligence, is the predominant circumstance in determining their progress. But I am of this opinion, not because I regard their moral or economical condition either as less powerful or less variable agencies, but because these are in a great degree the consequences of the intellectual condition, and are, in all cases, limited by it; as was observed in the preceding chapter. The intellectual changes are the most conspicuous agents in history, not from their superior force, considered in themselves, but because practically they work with the united power belonging to all three.(284)

§ 3. There is another distinction often neglected in the discussion of this subject, which it is extremely important to observe. The theory of the subjection of social progress to invariable laws, is often held in conjunction with the doctrine, that social progress can not be materially influenced by the exertions of individual persons, or by the acts of governments. But though these opinions are often held by the same persons, they are two very different opinions, and the confusion between them is the eternally recurring error of confounding Causation with Fatalism. Because whatever happens will be the effect of causes, human volitions among the rest, it does not follow that volitions, even those of peculiar individuals, are not of great efficacy as causes. If any one in a storm at sea, because about the same number of persons in every year perish by shipwreck, should conclude that it was useless for him to attempt to save his own life, we should call him a Fatalist; and should remind him that the efforts of shipwrecked persons to save their lives are so far from being immaterial, that the average amount of those efforts is one of the causes on which the ascertained annual number of deaths by shipwreck depend. However universal the laws of social development may be, they can not be more universal or more rigorous than those of the physical agencies of nature; yet human will can convert these into instruments of its designs, and the extent to which it does so makes the chief difference between savages and the most highly civilized people. Human and social facts, from their more complicated nature, are not less, but more, modifiable than mechanical and chemical facts; human agency, therefore, has still greater power over them. And accordingly, those who maintain that the evolution of society depends exclusively, or almost exclusively, on general causes, always include among these the collective knowledge and intellectual development of the race. But if of the race, why not also of some powerful monarch or thinker, or of the ruling portion of some political society, acting through its government? Though the varieties

of character among ordinary individuals neutralize one another on any large scale, exceptional individuals in important positions do not in any given age neutralize one another; there was not another Themistocles, or Luther, or Julius Cæsar, of equal powers and contrary dispositions, who exactly balanced the given Themistocles, Luther, and Cæsar, and prevented them from having any permanent effect. Moreover, for aught that appears, the volitions of exceptional persons, or the opinions and purposes of the individuals who at some particular time compose a government, may be indispensable links in the chain of causation by which even the general causes produce their effects; and I believe this to be the only tenable form of the theory.

Lord Macaulay, in a celebrated passage of one of his early essays (let me add that it was one which he did not himself choose to reprint), gives expression to the doctrine of the absolute inoperativeness of great men, more unqualified, I should think, than has been given to it by any writer of equal abilities. He compares them to persons who merely stand on a loftier height, and thence receive the sun's rays a little earlier, than the rest of the human race. "The sun illuminates the hills while it is still below the horizon, and truth is discovered by the highest minds a little before it becomes manifest to the multitude. This is the extent of their superiority. They are the first to catch and reflect a light which, without their assistance, must in a short time be visible to those who lie far beneath them." (285) If this metaphor is to be carried out, it follows that if there had been no Newton, the world would not only have had the Newtonian system, but would have had it equally soon; as the sun would have risen just as early to spectators in the plain if there had been no mountain at hand to catch still earlier rays. And so it would be, if truths, like the sun, rose by their own proper motion, without human effort; but not otherwise. I believe that if Newton had not lived, the world must have waited for the Newtonian philosophy until there had been another Newton, or his equivalent. No ordinary man, and no succession of ordinary men, could have achieved it. I will not go the length of saying that what Newton did in a single life, might not have been done in successive steps by some of those who followed him, each singly inferior to him in genius. But even the least of those steps required a man of great intellectual superiority. Eminent men do not merely see the coming light from the hill-top, they mount on the hill-top and evoke it; and if no one had ever ascended thither, the light, in many cases, might never have risen upon the plain at all. Philosophy and religion are abundantly amenable to general causes; yet few will doubt that, had there been no Socrates, no Plato, and no Aristotle, there would have been no philosophy for the next two thousand years, nor in all probability then; and that if there had been no Christ, and no St. Paul, there would have been no Christianity.

The point in which, above all, the influence of remarkable individuals is decisive, is in determining the celerity of the movement. In most states of society it is the existence of great men which decides even whether there shall be any progress. It is conceivable that Greece, or that Christian Europe, might have been progressive in certain periods of their history through general causes only: but if there had been no Mohammed, would Arabia have produced Avicenna or Averroes, or Caliphs of Bagdad or of Cordova? In determining, however, in what manner and order the progress of mankind shall take place if it take place at all, much less depends on the character of individuals. There is a sort of necessity established in this respect by the general laws of human nature--by the constitution of the human mind. Certain truths can not be discovered, nor inventions made, unless certain others have been made first; certain social improvements, from the nature of the case, can only follow, and not precede, others. The order of human progress, therefore, may to a certain extent have definite laws assigned to it: while as to its celerity, or even as to its taking place at all, no generalization, extending to the human species generally, can possibly be made; but only some very precarious approximate generalizations, confined to the small portion of mankind in whom there has been any thing like consecutive progress within the historical period, and deduced from their special position, or collected from their particular history. Even looking to the *manner* of progress, the order of succession of social states, there is need of great flexibility in our generalizations. The limits of variation in the possible development of social, as of animal life, are a subject of which little is yet understood, and are one of the great problems in social science. It is, at all events, a fact, that different portions of mankind, under the influence of different circumstances, have developed themselves in a more or less different manner and into different forms; and among these determining circumstances, the individual character of their great speculative thinkers or practical organizers may well have been one. Who can tell how profoundly the whole subsequent history of China may have been influenced by the individuality of Confucius? and of Sparta (and hence of Greece and

the world) by that of Lycurgus?

Concerning the nature and extent of what a great man under favorable circumstances can do for mankind, as well as of what a government can do for a nation, many different opinions are possible; and every shade of opinion on these points is consistent with the fullest recognition that there are invariable laws of historical phenomena. Of course the degree of influence which has to be assigned to these more special agencies, makes a great difference in the precision which can be given to the general laws, and in the confidence with which predictions can be grounded on them. Whatever depends on the peculiarities of individuals, combined with the accident of the positions they hold, is necessarily incapable of being foreseen. Undoubtedly these casual combinations might be eliminated like any others, by taking a sufficiently large cycle: the peculiarities of a great historical character make their influence felt in history sometimes for several thousand years, but it is highly probable that they will make no difference at all at the end of fifty millions. Since, however, we can not obtain an average of the vast length of time necessary to exhaust all the possible combinations of great men and circumstances, as much of the law of evolution of human affairs as depends upon this average, is and remains inaccessible to us; and within the next thousand years, which are of considerably more importance to us than the whole remainder of the fifty millions, the favorable and unfavorable combinations which will occur will be to us purely accidental. We can not foresee the advent of great men. Those who introduce new speculative thoughts or great practical conceptions into the world, can not have their epoch fixed beforehand. What science can do, is this. It can trace through past history the general causes which had brought mankind into that preliminary state which, when the right sort of great man appeared, rendered them accessible to his influence. If this state continues, experience renders it tolerably certain that in a longer or shorter period the great man will be produced; provided that the general circumstances of the country and people are (which very often they are not) compatible with his existence; of which point also, science can in some measure judge. It is in this manner that the results of progress, except as to the celerity of their production, can be, to a certain extent, reduced to regularity and law. And the belief that they can be so, is equally consistent with assigning very great, or very little efficacy, to the influence of exceptional men, or of the acts of governments. And the same may be said of all other accidents and disturbing causes.

§ 4. It would nevertheless be a great error to assign only a trifling importance to the agency of eminent individuals, or of governments. It must not be concluded that the influence of either is small, because they can not bestow what the general circumstances of society, and the course of its previous history, have not prepared it to receive. Neither thinkers nor governments effect all that they intend, but in compensation they often produce important results which they did not in the least foresee. Great men, and great actions, are seldom wasted; they send forth a thousand unseen influences, more effective than those which are seen; and though nine out of every ten things done, with a good purpose, by those who are in advance of their age, produce no material effect, the tenth thing produces effects twenty times as great as any one would have dreamed of predicting from it. Even the men who for want of sufficiently favorable circumstances left no impress at all upon their own age, have often been of the greatest value to posterity. Who could appear to have lived more entirely in vain than some of the early heretics? They were burned or massacred, their writings extirpated, their memory anathematized, and their very names and existence left for seven or eight centuries in the obscurity of musty manuscripts--their history to be gathered, perhaps, only from the sentences by which they were condemned. Yet the memory of these men--men who resisted certain pretensions or certain dogmas of the Church in the very age in which the unanimous assent of Christendom was afterward claimed as having been given to them, and asserted as the ground of their authority--broke the chain of tradition, established a series of precedents for resistance, inspired later Reformers with the courage, and armed them with the weapons, which they needed when mankind were better prepared to follow their impulse. To this example from men, let us add another from governments. The comparatively enlightened rule of which Spain had the benefit during a considerable part of the eighteenth century, did not correct the fundamental defects of the Spanish people; and in consequence, though it did great temporary good, so much of that good perished with it, that it may plausibly be affirmed to have had no permanent effect. The case has been cited as a proof how little governments can do in opposition to the causes which have determined the general character of the nation. It does show how much there is which they can not do; but not that they can do nothing. Compare

what Spain was at the beginning of that half-century of liberal government, with what she had become at its close. That period fairly let in the light of European thought upon the more educated classes; and it never afterward ceased to go on spreading. Previous to that time the change was in an inverse direction; culture, light, intellectual and even material activity, were becoming extinguished. Was it nothing to arrest this downward and convert it into an upward course? How much that Charles the Third and Aranda could not do, has been the ultimate consequence of what they did! To that half-century Spain owes that she has got rid of the Inquisition, that she has got rid of the monks, that she now has parliaments and (save in exceptional intervals) a free press, and the feelings of freedom and citizenship, and is acquiring railroads and all the other constituents of material and economical progress. In the Spain which preceded that era, there was not a single element at work which could have led to these results in any length of time, if the country had continued to be governed as it was by the last princes of the Austrian dynasty, or if the Bourbon rulers had been from the first what, both in Spain and in Naples, they afterward became.

And if a government can do much, even when it seems to have done little, in causing positive improvement, still greater are the issues dependent on it in the way of warding off evils, both internal and external, which else would stop improvement altogether. A good or a bad counselor, in a single city at a particular crisis, has affected the whole subsequent fate of the world. It is as certain as any contingent judgment respecting historical events can be, that if there had been no Themistocles there would have been no victory of Salamis; and had there not, where would have been all our civilization? How different, again, would have been the issue if Epaminondas, or Timoleon, or even Iphicrates, instead of Chares and Lysicles, had commanded at Chæroneia. As is well said in the second of two Essays on the Study of History,(286) in my judgment the soundest and most philosophical productions which the recent controversies on this subject have called forth, historical science authorizes not absolute, but only conditional predictions. General causes count for much, but individuals also "produce great changes in history, and color its whole complexion long after their death.... No one can doubt that the Roman republic would have subsided into a military despotism if Julius Cæsar had never lived" (thus much was rendered practically certain by general causes); "but is it at all clear that in that case Gaul would ever have formed a province of the empire? Might not Varus have lost his three legions on the banks of the Rhone? and might not that river have become the frontier instead of the Rhine? This might well have happened if Cæsar and Crassus had changed provinces; and it is surely impossible to say that in such an event the venue (as lawyers say) of European civilization might not have been changed. The Norman Conquest in the same way was as much the act of a single man, as the writing of a newspaper article; and knowing as we do the history of that man and his family, we can retrospectively predict with all but infallible certainty, that no other person" (no other in that age, I presume, is meant) "could have accomplished the enterprise. If it had not been accomplished, is there any ground to suppose that either our history or our national character would have been what they are?"

As is most truly remarked by the same writer, the whole stream of Grecian history, as cleared up by Mr. Grote, is one series of examples how often events on which the whole destiny of subsequent civilization turned, were dependent on the personal character for good or evil of some one individual. It must be said, however, that Greece furnishes the most extreme example of this nature to be found in history, and is a very exaggerated specimen of the general tendency. It has happened only that once, and will probably never happen again, that the fortunes of mankind depended upon keeping a certain order of things in existence in a single town, or a country scarcely larger than Yorkshire; capable of being ruined or saved by a hundred causes, of very slight magnitude in comparison with the general tendencies of human affairs. Neither ordinary accidents, nor the characters of individuals, can ever again be so vitally important as they then were. The longer our species lasts, and the more civilized it becomes, the more, as Comte remarks, does the influence of past generations over the present, and of mankind *en masse* over every individual in it, predominate over other forces; and though the course of affairs never ceases to be susceptible of alteration both by accidents and by personal qualities, the increasing preponderance of the collective agency of the species over all minor causes, is constantly bringing the general evolution of the race into something which deviates less from a certain and preappointed track. Historical science, therefore, is always becoming more possible; not solely because it is better studied, but because, in every generation, it becomes better adapted for study.