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Authority

M. E. Clark

July 11th 1836

Independence of thought is necessary to intellectual power. While the field of the mind is circumscribed originality is forbidden and its acts are fruitless.

Defiance to Authority has ever cramped the intellect and presented an invincible barrier to mental activity. It is the great antagonist to free reflection; the two cannot agree. Continually opposing its adamant barrier to the mind it confines it to a narrow circle. It is only when the mind, trusting in its own power, cuts itself loose from all external dependence that the bond of blind authority is broken.

Revelation and the human reason are alone ultimate, upon these only can we depend. When we trust the conclusions of others without having tested their validity, we depend upon principles which when placed in the scale of the reason may not stand the test of truth: - we admit into our systems as facts what may be mere speculations, and thus introduce into our philosophy a prolific source of error.

The great mass of men are dependent for their opinions. Too idolatrous

to think for themselves, or considering the
field as all preoccupied, they put implicit
faith in the conclusions of others - adopting
their opinions, following their plans, and
joining in their pursuits. The absolute
principles of truth - the only guide for man,
in which alone we can find a firm
foundation, are laid aside for man's
authority. A few leading minds and
ambitious spirits - mark out the road
and appoint the destinies of the race.

Philosophy, science and art have
alike felt its baneful influence. It has
found its way into the commonest occupations
of life. In our political parties, where
the masses are guided less by principles than
by prejudice, where the chieftains of party
lead their thoughtless and often deluded
followers whithersoever they will, its effects
are plainly evident. Our legislative
assemblies, our judiciary, the associations
of the people, are all constant witnesses
of the evil tendencies of authority.

If then its influence in these
practical employments of life, where the
most ignorant are accustomed to assent
their opinions, is so pernicious. How

much more so must it be in the higher
and more abstract questions of philosophy?

From the days of Aristotle & Plato
to the commencement of the sixteenth
century originality - and independence had
been banished from the intellect,
The times of the early Christian Church
and the middle ages were characterized
by a total want of invention. The systems
of the old Greek philosophers were studied
commented upon and remodelled, but nothing
essentially new was added to the domain of
science. The dialectics of Aristotle and
the fruitless logomachies of the schools
received the whole attention of scholars.

The schoolmen of the middle ages
occupied themselves within a narrow circle,
Their questionings, never transcending the
principles already laid down, produced
no great effect. - There was, to be sure,
a development of ~~science~~ principles
which in a manner constituted a growth
of science, but the mind was circumscribed
and as a consequence dwarfed. Men who
might have immortalized their names, had
they but devoted to independent investigation
the thought which they devoted to the

development of other theories, have left only
their bare names to posterity

development of other's theories, have left only their own names to posterity.

But it was the mission of the sixteenth century to break the enchantment and throw off the bonds of the masters.

A reaction had become a necessity.

The mind, essentially active, must have the power of free reflection. In matters of religion it had been bound as well as in religion philosophy; and successively the reaction took place - first in religion then in philosophy. The one was in a great measure a preparation for the other. The infallibility of the church, the opinions of Aristotle and the physical systems of the universe began to be questioned. Doubt led to investigation - they were examined, their weaknesses discovered their faults unveiled.

The Reformation burst like a thunder-cloud upon the church. For ages men had reposed upon its infallibility.

The sole source of truth in religion - the Bible had been forgotten.

The dependence of men had been placed in the infallibility of the Pope.

The Bible chained in the library of Erfurth opened to Luther the true

foundations of religion, He saw at once the dark paths in which men had followed their spiritual teachers, and with an independence worthy of the cause, placed himself on the principles of truth, in opposition to blind authority.

But the blow which the reformation had dealt to the Church led men to test the validity of their philosophy also, If the Church was fallible Aristotle might be fallible, If the doctrines of the Church were opposed to the truths of the Bible the philosophy of Aristotle might be opposed to the absolute principles of the human reason, Systems which for nearly twenty centuries had held undisputed sway, were ready to be renounced.

Bacon & Descartes, grounding their principles upon their own investigations, casting aside all authority, laid the basis of philosophy on a solid foundation.

Descartes, while yet a youth, discarded the dogmas which he had been taught, and determined to build up a new philosophy.

The results of his method, of his insurrection from all former opinions, are seen in the structure of modern philosophy. It was with him it took its rise - upon the basis which he furnished

it has become what philosophy must be
the unity of science.

Bacon, by his method of investigation,
gave to the physical sciences, new life. With him
they date their second birth, Copernicus
preceded, but Kepler, Galileo & Newton,
came after him. Huss was to the
reformation as Copernicus to the revolution
in the physical sciences, the John Baptist
of the new dispensation; while Bacon and
his coadjutors broke the charm of infallibility
that had fettered the mind to prescription
authority - braved the anathemas of the
schoolmen and laid the foundations of the
glorious protestantism of science.

The sixteenth century began a great work
in the rejection of former systems and the
fruitless speculations of the middle ages.
The seventeenth continuing the work prepared
a solid foundation on which succeeding
ages might raise a noble superstructure.

This is the work of the present & the future. Let
each devote his entire energies to its consum-
mation and we shall the temple of universal
science, supported upon marble pillars and
adorned with costly gems, reaching the
ethereal vault of Heaven with its
golden dome,

Commencement Oration of M. E. Clark, Class of 1856
Transcribed by Michael M. Geduldig, June 24, 2006
Edited by Don Sailer, November 2009

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July 11th 1856

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