§ 1. In the last lecture I have been engaged in examining the relation of Philosophy to History: and especially in criticising closely the pretensions of the Historical Method to have ‘invaded and transformed all departments of thought.’ So far I have used the term ‘History’ and ‘Historical Method’ in the widest possible sense, to include any study of the past pursued with a view to the explanation of the present. It is in this widest sense that the universality of application of the Historical Method seemed to me most plausible. But there is a narrower and more ordinary sense, more in harmony with the current use of the word ‘history’ unqualified, according to which ‘Historical Method’ would imply a study not of past facts generally, but of past social facts, especially thoughts and sentiments; and it is with this narrower meaning that the current enthusiasm for the Historical Method is perhaps most frequently connected. In this narrower sense we might equally well—or perhaps better—term it the Sociological Method.
At this point, therefore, I turn definitely to the discussion of the Relation of Philosophy to Sociology. It is only with one special department of Sociology that we shall be, in the main, concerned. In order to present a general view of the subject-matter of this department I may conveniently begin the discussion by recalling what was said in the last lecture, as to the extent to which Sociology has successfully invaded, during the last generation, the peculiarly English study which I have called Psychogony; the inquiry, that is, into the growth and development of Mind.

I think it important to dwell on this relation of Psychology to Sociology, because the part of psychological study which is specially influenced by the social factor is just that part in which the subject-matter of Psychology and Philosophy most nearly coincide—the region of thought and the more refined and complex emotions. I agree with the late Professor Croom Robertson in holding that the non-recognition of the social factor in Psychology is a grave defect in the method of the older English psychologists. As he says:—"They can hardly be blamed for not anticipating the importance of heredity: but in the last century, as at other times, it was sufficiently plain that children, being born into the world, are born into society, and are under overpowering social influences before (if one may so speak) they have any chance of being their proper selves."  

Of these influences, on the intellectual side, language

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1 Philosophical Remains, 1894, p. 66.
is the great medium. Even to a definite apprehension of particular objects in space children are effectively helped by the fact that there is a current medium of social communication about things, the advantage of which is forced upon them. But this is not the chief point. As all are agreed, it is for purposes of general knowledge that language is most indispensable; and the language spoken by a race of men is an accurate index to the grade of intellectual comprehension, the stage of intellectual progress reached by the community; and to this grade the child is introduced through the speech of others. There is a ready-made scheme of thought given to us *en bloc* with the words of our mother-tongue, which we use our natural subjective experience mainly to decipher and verify.

I might go on to show how similarly, though more indefinitely, each one's habitual emotions and volitions are influenced by sympathy with those of the maturer human beings among whom he grows up. But I am not giving a course of lectures on Psychology, and I have said enough to indicate the place of the social factor in it.

The individual adult man, then, as known to us by experience, is what he is in consequence of having grown up in social relations; and we have no ground for saying—as Mill has done in the passage already quoted\(^1\)—that the laws or uniformities of his actual behaviour as a member of a community are derived from the laws of his *hypothetical* behaviour as an abstract individual.

\(^1\) Cf. p. 158 above.
It is not more true that Sociology is derived from and presupposes Psychology, than that Psychology, except of a very limited kind, presupposes Sociology; because of the fundamental importance in considering the phenomena of the individual mind of the effects of sympathy, and of the communication of ideas and feelings from mind to mind. Even the most original individual is to a great extent the child or creature of his age; he shares the common thought, the common sentiment of his society at a given time.¹

On this point, there is, I conceive, but little difference of opinion among different schools of thought at the present day. It would be generally agreed that in seeking a historical explanation of the whole complex succession of thoughts, sentiments, and habits that forms the intellectual life of an educated human being in a civilised society we are inevitably led from Psychology or Psychogony into Sociology or Social Science. We have to study the development of the social mind which the individual shares.

We have then, henceforward, to concentrate attention on this department of Sociological inquiry: the study of the common sentiments and thoughts, opinions and conceptions, the fundamental assumptions which tend to be shared by the members of a society,² or at least by the educated and thoughtful members,

¹ I may observe that in some places Mill's language seems to acknowledge this to the utmost (cf. Logic, bk. vi. ch. x.); in others, as the one before quoted, he seems entirely to overlook it. This is due to a combination of two streams of speculation—the Comtian Sociology, and the English Psychology of his father, James Mill—which he has imperfectly harmonised.

² Often a society far more extensive than any one state.
at any given time; but which change from age to age, so that a man born in one age tends to acquire a different set from a man born in another. Of this common thought any individual, even a highly educated individual, usually possesses only a very small part, in the fulness with which it belongs to his society as a whole; but it is characteristic of a really educated man that he has always in some degree, though in an indefinitely varying degree, a general acquaintance with the rest and a vague sympathetic apprehension of it. For example, those of us who know least of science have some general apprehension of the dominant conceptions of current Physics—conservation of mass and energy; and of current Biology—evolution, natural selection, and the struggle for existence. Those of us who know least of Logic know that the present tendencies of thought are inductive and experimental. Those of us who know least of History know that we are living in an age in which the Historical Method is antiquating the old unhistorical dogmatism in Politics and cognate studies. Those of us who know least of Philosophy, and would have considerable difficulty in constructing a cogent argument for the belief in the Uniformity of Nature, are aware that it is a mark of enlightenment to assume that 'miracles do not happen.'

Now there is not, I think, any doubt that the investigation of the important changes that have historically occurred in the prevalent beliefs of human societies is an important study: and the students of Sociology have, I conceive, a right to claim it for
their own, and to demand that it be pursued as a branch of a comprehensive inquiry into the evolution of human society as a whole. Especially in the departments of Ethics and Politics, with which I have been specially concerned, do I recognise the importance of studying in historical order the variations in political ideas and beliefs in their double relation partly as cause and partly as effect of change in political facts; and similarly in studying the changes in ethical ideas in connexion with changes in other elements of social structure and in the relations between societices. And of course in both these studies, since they are departments of history, we must use a historical method.

§ 2. But what we have now to consider is not the general interest of this inquiry as a branch of Sociology: but its importance in relation to the question of the validity of the thoughts and beliefs investigated. The question is how far a sociological inquiry into the history of our beliefs can and ought to affect our philosophical view of their truth or falsehood. To simplify the consideration of this question let us consider first the destructive, and then the constructive effect of such an inquiry, i.e. let us first ask how far the historical study of beliefs leads us to regard them as untrustworthy, and then how far it tends to prove them trustworthy and valid.

Here I may first note that a mere investigation of the facts—the actual diversity and succession of human beliefs in such subjects as ethics and politics and theology—without any establishment of laws of
change, does seem to tend to be connected with a general scepticism as to the validity of the doctrines studied; though the exact nature of the connexion is difficult to determine. The scepticism is, I think, partly the effect and partly the cause of the concentration of the student's mind on his historical research. It partly tends to result from historical study, because of the vast and bewildering variety of conflicting beliefs, all strongly, even unhesitatingly entertained at certain times and places, which this study marshals before us. The student's own most fundamental and most cherished convictions seem forced, as it were, to step down from their secure pedestals, and to take their places in the endless line that is marching past. Other conflicting convictions, for which their holders have been ready to die, have gone before and are out of sight: others as short-lived are coming after, which the transient generations ahead will probably embrace with equal tenacity. Thus to the historian, who is an animal of larger discourse than the plain man, looking before and after in a fuller sense, the whole defiling train of beliefs tends to become something from which he sits apart,

Beholding besides thoughts the end of thought,
Hearing oblivion beyond memory.

Every portion of this series seems to have lost power to hold his own reason in the grip of true conviction: for peace's sake, he accepts the beliefs that are pressed on him by public opinion in his own age and country; but in his heart he believes in nothing but history. I
think that some effect of this kind is actually produced, in varying intensity, on the minds of many students of the history of opinion: but I cannot regard it as normal and legitimate—indeed I doubt whether even those who feel this sceptical effect most strongly would usually maintain their scepticism as a conclusion attained by any explicit rational procedure, admitting of logical tests.

So far as Ethics is concerned, I have elsewhere contended¹ that the ascertainment of the origin and development of beliefs cannot logically have any such general effect in destroying our confidence in beliefs actually held, as has been sometimes confusedly supposed by those who have considered it important to show that a system of moral intuitions—or at least the faculty of moral intuition—was innate and not derived or developed. To show that any such intuition was caused in a particular way can have no tendency to make a reasonable man regard it as invalid unless it can be also shown that the causes operating were such as would tend to make it untrue; since it is a fundamental assumption of sociological, as of all other scientific inquiries, that every belief must have been caused in some particular way,—sociological beliefs no less than ethical. But in order to prove that any belief—say any ethical belief—is the result of causes tending to produce an erroneous belief, we must know that some other ethical belief is true, for error is only proved by proving inconsistency with truth. General disbelief therefore

¹ See Methods of Ethics, bk. iii. ch. i. § 4.
cannot be logically justified in this way either in ethics or in any other department: though doubtless *prima facie* general scepticism may be explained, by the complex divergence and conflict of beliefs which this historical inquiry shows us. And certainly I should rather regard this sceptical effect of the historical method as a kind of disorder, if I may so say, which is liable to attack weakly organised systems of belief, while it is powerless against those more strongly organised—those, I mean, as to which there is a consensus of experts now established. I pointed out before¹ that historical study has now no similar effects in mathematics or physical science or astronomy: the student of the history of these sciences traces the bizarre opinions and fantastic methods of earlier savants without feeling or causing the slightest distrust of our own methods or conclusions. To take a historic example: when we learn the great Kepler's view of the celestial harmonies produced by the various and varying velocities of the several planets and of the gratification these harmonies gave to the sentient soul inhabiting the sun, we are entertained and perhaps instructed; but it never occurs to us to question that we are right in neglecting this peculiar line of speculation. But no doubt, in departments where fundamental controversy and divergence of method exist among ourselves,—as they do in Ethics—the scepticism which such present controversies and divergencies tend to generate draws further nutriment from historical study,

¹ [Lecture VI. § 2, pp. 127 ff.]
owing to the ampler range and greater complexity of variation which the history of doctrine brings before us.

This is a natural and perhaps inevitable result of contemplating man historically. But to yield to it seems to me mere weakness; and it not unfrequently leads to a curious, contradictory state of mind in the historian who does yield to it. He finds his fundamental beliefs in ethics, politics, theology, philosophy, as I have said, drop from him, in spite of the apparent self-evidence with which they present themselves—or once presented themselves—to him, and, as he knows, to others also: but to his historic beliefs—and even his prehistoric conjectures as to (e.g.) the structure of polity in primitive Greece, the conditions of property in primitive Rome, the marriage relations of our Aryan ancestors—he clings with a passionate intensity of conviction which is in singular contrast to the slenderness of the evidence that it is possible to adduce in their support.

No doubt, as I before hinted, the historical study of beliefs in such departments as ethics, politics, or theology is sometimes the effect as much as the cause of this kind of scepticism: the mind, wearied of the vain effort to ascertain what is true, settles down more and more to the task of ascertaining what has been held; here, at least, the student feels, some steady progress and stable results may be hoped for. This is human and natural enough: but it is human surely in a bad sense—human weakness. Conflict and controversy on fundamental points, with
adequately trained, subtle, and penetrating intellects, afford adequate grounds for self-distrust, for circum-
spection, for re-examination of our fundamental assumptions and methods, for continued patient efforts to enter into the point of view of opponents; but they are surely not adequate grounds for the abandon-
ment of the highest interests of reason and humanity.

§ 3. So much for the general scepticism in ethics and politics that is liable to result from historical study. But the question remains how far an examin-
ation of the particular process by which particular moral or political beliefs have grown up may prove that the beliefs in question are false or misleading owing to certain definite tendencies to cause error which we find in the process.

Now no doubt if, when we trace the history of any belief, we find demonstrably false opinions among its antecedents, this discovery suggests that the belief in question is also false. But though it suggests this, it by no means proves it. So far, indeed, as the belief in question is held not as self-evident, but as an inference from antecedent premises, the demonstration of the falsity of the premises certainly removes the ground for believing. Thus I think no study of historical morality can leave unimpaired the influence of mere custom and opinion on the reflective individual, or of the blind emotional impulse normally connected with custom and tradition. That anything is right, because an overwhelming majority of human beings think so and act accordingly, becomes a manifestly untenable inference, when we contemplate the
monstrous beliefs as to right and wrong which this overwhelming majority has entertained and acted on in previous ages.

But the case is quite different when the antecedent false opinions are merely found to have been among the causes of the belief in question, and are not put forward as reasons for holding it. It may be that it is the destiny of the human intellect to progress through error to truth; and the history of established sciences, solidly supported at the present time on the agreement of experts using substantially the same method, shows that this has in fact not rarely been the case. Whether we can, as Comte thought, find the fundamental law of the evolution of truth from error in a ‘law of three stages’—theological, metaphysical, positive—is a disputed question which I reserve for a subsequent lecture: but the more general, vaguer proposition that truth grows gradually out of error, and, so far as we can see, would not have been reached except by the way of error, this will hardly be disputed. Hence, however clear may be the historical connexion between some moral rule which we are disposed to regard as binding and some primitive custom which we unhesitatingly condemn as pernicious or some belief which we unhesitatingly reject as absurd, the later belief may still be true though that which preceded and partly caused it was false.

Let us take one or two instances: Punishment, we all agree, ought to be inflicted on criminals: and it is still a widely-spread belief—I have seen it maintained by competent writers in journals of repute
—that such infliction is desirable in itself, and not merely in view of its consequences in preventing future crime in the way of determent, reformation, or disablement, as utilitarians hold. This, indeed, is one of the most important points at issue between utilitarians and their opponents. Well, there is no doubt, when we view punishment as a political and social fact and trace its history, that the historical link of filiation between the sentiment that impels to punishment and the earlier sentiment that impels to revenge is unmistakable. The blood-feud is, in earlier stages of society, the customary and only effective means of repressing manslaughter; and as the consequence of this—or rather perhaps as a concomitant effect of the causes to which this is due—there grows up a specially intense sense of the duty of revenge. Well, as the process of civilisation goes on, Government puts down the blood-feud, being moved to do so, no doubt, largely by the weakening and disturbing effect of private war of all kinds. Then Christianity comes, preaching the duty of forgiveness. And ultimately our present complex state of feeling is generated, that the individual wronged ought to forgive; this is his sacred duty; but that society or the Government, which 'bearth not the sword in vain,' ought to punish. Now I think this history certainly suggests the truth of the utilitarian view of punishment rather than the older intuitional view. But though it suggests it, it certainly does not disprove the latter: it still remains quite possible to regard the old blood-feud as 'rude justice' and the sentiment
connected with it as having a good and bad element —justice and revenge blended. Then, it may be said, under the influence of civilisation the right and proper moral feeling that manslaughter ought to be punished is distinguished and separated from the wrong personal feeling that I ought to avenge the manslaughter of a kinsman. To use a phrase of Mr. Spencer's, it may be said that 'Revenge' is a 'pro-ethical' sentiment which preceded the true ethical sentiment of justice. Well, I cannot deny that this is an admissible view of the process that sociology brings clearly before us: and therefore any inference from the sociological aperçu to the decision of the ethical issue is not logically conclusive.

Let us turn to another sentiment, which I select as one that cannot be said to be now prevalent,—the sentiment against the re-marriage of widows. I select it because, though there is no general condemnation of this act, Auguste Comte, the founder of Sociology, in laying down rules for his Positivist Community, carried the idea of monogamy to this point of severity for men as well as women. I mention this, as otherwise the sentiment might be thought to be necessarily connected with Christian ideas of resurrection and a future life. Well, it would not, I think, be difficult to show the historic connexion of this sentiment with the barbaric impulse not only to make offerings of food on the grave of a deceased chief or brave, but to sacrifice his favourite horse there, and deposit his spear or sword, etc. We see the connecting link in the burning of the Hindoo widow on the funeral pile:
which our Government in India has thought it right to put down by law, against (I believe) the strong moral sentiment of the Hindoos. The connexion seems unmistakable, but here again no logical inference is possible against the validity of the later sentiment. It may be said that the barbarous belief that the departed chief required food and spear was a mere husk of the true intuition that his soul was immortal: and that the sentiment of the Hindoo widow is noble, though its expression is cruel and exaggerated.

To sum up: I think that the sceptical or destructive effect often attributed to, and sometimes really exercised by, the study of the history of opinion does not really rest on a logical basis. In my next lecture I shall consider how far this study can have a positive effect, in the way of enabling us to find truth among the diversities of opinion studied.
§ 1. In the last lecture I examined the bearing of the inquiry into the development of human knowledge and beliefs—knowledge being belief taken as well-grounded—on the philosophical question of the validity of the beliefs, and especially of such beliefs as do not present themselves either as exactly self-evident or as conclusions demonstrated from self-evident premises, though in ordinary thought they appear to be assumed unquestioningly.\(^1\) Such beliefs, as a part of a generally accepted system, have at any rate, no less than those that present themselves as strictly self-evident or demonstrated, the characteristics of general acceptance. I have accordingly called them, in Ethics, the beliefs of Common Sense: and this term is convenient to suggest the sociological as well as the philosophical point of view from which such beliefs may be regarded.

I began by pointing out that, owing to the overwhelming importance of the social factor in the

\(^1\) Cf. the belief in the existence of the external world or that in Universal Causation.
causation of the beliefs of a normal human individual, the methods of Psychology and Sociology blend in this inquiry, and the method of Sociology dominates.

Our fundamental question, then, was: How do the results of sociological study of beliefs, and especially of the fundamental beliefs commonly accepted, affect the philosophical consideration of them?

In examining this question I thought it well to divide it into two parts, and consider separately, first the destructive and negative effect of sociological or historical study of the beliefs of Common Sense—its effect in the way of producing scepticism, general or particular; and then its positive or constructive effect, in the way of supporting or confirming the validity of such beliefs.

As regards the first part of the question, I tried to show that the vague general scepticism which the study of the history of opinion is liable to produce, is only effective in a department of thought which is still in a condition of fundamental controversy, and only effective in a secondary way as adding strength to the doubts which this controversy itself reasonably produces. For, in departments like physical science, in which 'consensus of experts' has been attained, historical study has, as I showed, no such force: a study of the history of alchemy does not shake our confidence in modern chemistry, nor a study of astrology our confidence in astronomy.

The question still remains whether an examination of the particular antecedent history of particular current beliefs may not prove their falsity. And, as
I said, if, when we trace the history of any belief, we find demonstrably false opinions among its antecedents, the discovery certainly suggests that the belief in question is false. But it only proves this when the belief is held as an inference from premises ascertained to be false: the case is quite different when the false opinions found among the antecedents of the belief in question are not put forward as reasons for holding it. The history of the established sciences shows us truth continually and gradually attained through a strange and bewildering course of mazy and conflicting errors: and we have every reason to regard the antecedence of error as an indispensable condition of the attainment of truth.

§ 2. So much for the sceptical effect of the historical study of human thought. I do not, however, regard this as its main or normal effect: were it so, the prevalent enthusiasm for the Historical Method would be quite unaccountable. This is rather due to the hope or conviction that the proper study of history, and that alone, has the gift of healing the scepticism which the history of beliefs, if crudely and superficially apprehended, no doubt tends to aggravate: that it will yield the patient and duly trained inquirer a clue through the maze of opinions, a criterion by which he may find truth at the last.

Now I am far from wishing to discourage such hopes—so long as they remain merely hopes: but they seem to me in many minds to have transformed themselves into convictions too confident and unhesitating for the present state of our knowledge. I
quite admit that a study of the development of human opinion in any department may give us valuable confirmation for conclusions otherwise arrived at as to the right procedure for attaining truth in that department; but I do not see how such conclusions can possibly be established in the first instance by a purely historical method. To show this, let us suppose realised the utmost hopes of the most sanguine student of the science of history: let us suppose that we have ascertained completely the law of development of ethical, political, theological, or philosophical opinion, so that we can state accurately the views which will be generally accepted by the coming generation. We cannot therefore take the foreseen current opinion to be true, any more than the opinion now current: and it would be peculiarly hard for the historical student to do this, as he would do so under the condition of having to hold at the same time that the dissimilar opinions prevalent in previous ages were untrue so far as dissimilar.

Let us take as illustration a political belief. Suppose I foresee, what perhaps was more probable a generation ago than now, that the coming democracy will hold as a universal belief that the will of the numerical majority ought always to be obeyed, and that to resist it is criminal rebellion against rational political order—just as two hundred years ago the corresponding belief was held with regard to resistance to the will of a hereditary monarch. Suppose I foresee certainly that this belief will come, I cannot therefore conclude that it will be a true belief. I am
not even led any way towards this conclusion: illusions as to the divine right of majorities may come and pass, like illusions as to the divine right of kings: if its validity is to be proved it must be by some other method.

Or, again, take an ethical belief. As I noticed last time, there is a stage in the development of society at which the duty of requiting evil appears to be as intensely felt to be imperative, by the common moral sentiment of the society, as the duty of requiting good. But civilisation gradually makes men regard the blood-feud and the sacred duty of shedding blood for blood, destroying tooth for tooth, as barbaric. Suppose then that I can foresee that the duty of gratitude will hereafter go the way of the duty of resentment, so that the only result of a man's having rendered me gratuitous services will be that I shall regard him with approval as the organ of society for rendering me such services in future, and complain if he leaves off rendering them; leaving it to society to allot him any remuneration for his services that may be expedient.\(^1\) Well, the mere fact that I can foresee that it will come has no tendency to make me judge it good that it should come: or judge that this view of duty will be truer than my own now. I am disposed to go further, and say that unless we start with a thoroughly sceptical or eccentric view as to the attainment of truth in any subject—ethics, politics, theology, or philosophy—unless we bring this to the

\(^1\) I take this case, because I seem to discern rudiments of this change actually going on.
study of history or somehow, not logically, derive it from the study, there will be a fundamental difficulty in forecasting the development of opinions, whatever insight into the law of development we may appear to derive from a study of the past. For we shall have some view of our own—say some theory of political or ethical end or method widely accepted here and now—which we shall regard as true: at the same time, as historians, we shall contemplate a long line of divergent opinions in past ages—such as the theological fancy of the divine right of kings, just mentioned, or the metaphysical fiction of the natural rights of man. Surely the unique quality of being true which we attribute to the opinions of our own time must make inevitably a very profound difference between the past that leads up to our own truth and the future that takes it as point of departure: so that the line of development in the past can hardly give us much insight into the line of progress in the future. For the present must on this assumption be conceived as a culmination or turning-point in the process of change: the past is seen as a process through error to truth, and the future—so far as change is conceived to go on in fundamental beliefs—must be conceived as the reverse process from truth to error: and it is hard to see how the laws of change and development ascertained by studying the former process can enable us to forecast the latter,—unless history is held to show us examples of similar double processes before, of movements from error to truth, followed by movements from truth to error. Now
something may no doubt be said for this view of the history of thought and human society, as resembling the oscillatory movement of a pendulum: but it is hardly a view that the facts, adequately examined, on the whole support; and it is certainly not maintained by any sociologist whose work I know.

§ 3. The lines of answer pursued by Sociologists, in face of the difficulty I have described, are of quite a different kind. In the main, I think we may distinguish two such lines: one of which may perhaps be described as the more philosophical—as being only attractive to minds with some tincture of philosophy—and the other the more popular. But both have the support of philosophers: and it is, as we shall see, possible to combine the two. The formula of the first line of reply is, briefly, that 'knowledge is relative,' of the second that 'knowledge—and human society generally—is progressive.' But a little further explanation of the two formulæ seems desirable, before we pass to consider the lines of answer in detail.

The first line of thought admits to a certain extent the sceptical effect of the historical study of beliefs. It admits, that is, that the process of change in the fundamental beliefs—ethical, political, theological, or philosophical—that we find in examining the process of human thought through the ages does lead us to the conclusion that 'absolute truth' is beyond the attainment of the human mind: but it endeavours to console the student by limiting this admission to 'absolute truth.' It endeavours to reassure him by affirming that though absolute truth is unattainable,
relative truth is attainable, and is, in fact, always or necessarily attained: for we may regard the divergent beliefs of different ages and countries as all or for the most part true 'relatively,' and 'relative truth' is all that the mature human mind, taught wisdom by the repeated failure of attempts to penetrate to 'absolute truth,' ought to seek to attain.

Now this answer seems to give great satisfaction to many minds, and therefore I desire to examine it fully. We have already had occasion to refer to it, in dealing with the task of defining Metaphysics. For we found it to be a prevalent view of Metaphysics that it is concerned with 'absolute reality' as contrasted with Science and with Philosophy (so far as merely systematising the Sciences), which are held to be concerned with the 'relative' or 'phenomenal.' At first sight, then, it seems that if Sociology leads to the conclusion that the fundamental beliefs of different ages and countries, speaking broadly, are all 'relatively' though not 'absolutely' true, it leads to a conclusion in harmony with the scientific conception of knowledge: and I think it is partly due to this apparent harmony that this view of the 'relative truth' of successive phases of belief, in the departments of ethics, politics, and to some extent of theology, has come to be so widely accepted.

And, as I before noticed, this view affords a possible—I will not say 'reconciliation,' but *modus vivendi*—between Sociology and Metaphysical Philosophy which is attractive to some minds. For the Sociologist may say that his study of human beliefs does not in any
way conflict with, or invade the province of, metaphysical inquiry: it not only leaves room for metaphysics, but even concedes the first rank to it, as the more dignified and profound inquiry. We may take the concession to be sometimes sincere: and so taking it, may consider whether this *modus vivendi* is acceptable.

I propose, then, presently, to examine this answer closely. But before proceeding to this, I should like to point out that it does not entirely help us out of the difficulty in the way of sociological foresight which I have pointed out, it only alters the nature of the difficulty. For though the doctrines of the Relativity of knowledge may enable us to view the divergent beliefs represented in a series from past, through present, to future as all 'relatively true' in spite of their differences, still there is one fundamental truth which will not have this relativity: viz. the truth that all truth is relative. This the Relativist must, I think, admit to be absolutely known, unless his Relativism is to lapse into mere and palpable scepticism: and he will probably hold also that this absolute and fundamental truth ought to be accepted by all enlightened persons. But then the general acceptance by enlightened persons of this fundamental proposition must, it would seem, establish a fundamentally important distinction between the thought of the present age and the thought of the previous ages: for in previous ages the persons engaged in the pursuit of knowledge—the intellectual *élite* of civilised society—pursued truth eagerly, and partially believed them-
selves to have attained it, without—for the most part—a consciousness of its relativity, or at any rate without a full consciousness. We, on the other hand, or the coming men, are, according to the doctrine I am examining, supposed to have attained this full consciousness. On this point then no further change seems possible, unless we suppose future humanity to lapse from knowledge into ignorance on this point—which would get us into the difficulty before mentioned of conceiving the present as a culmination or turning-point between the two movements, one from error to truth and the other from truth to error. But if no further change is possible, then surely, though in a different way, there must be a profound difference between the past history of belief, in which we trace the succession of generations pursuing absolute truth and mostly holding opinions—ethical, political, theological—conceived to be absolutely true, and the forecast of its future history, in which the pursuit and the consciousness of attainment can only be of relative truth. In view of this profound difference, it would seem that any forecast of the future must be presumptuous; the development of past thought can hardly afford any guidance as to the development of future thought under this essentially different fundamental condition.

For my own part, if I conceive the intellectual élite of civilised society, the thoroughly instructed persons, accepting in any department of thought this philosophical 'relativism' pure and simple, with the full impartiality and neutrality as between the diver-
gent beliefs of different ages which appears to constitute its philosophical attraction—I can hardly imagine the pursuit of truth going on at all in that department among these thoroughly instructed persons. The aim of attaining the true ethical or political ideal, the true view of duty and right and ultimate good, either in private conduct or the constitution of society, appears to me worthy of the sustained ardour and devotion which it has in the past actually aroused in philosophical minds: but I cannot imagine how any one should

Scorn delights and live laborious days

in order to pass from the relative truth of the nineteenth century to the relative truth of the twentieth, supposing the latter to be not a jot more true or less merely relative than the former.

§4. Let us now examine more closely the propositions that ‘all our knowledge is relative’ or that ‘the truth attainable by man is only relative truth.’ It might conceivably be interpreted in as many different senses as there are different kinds of relations: but I shall only take note of senses in which the word ‘relative’ appears to have been actually used in this connexion. First, I would distinguish the meaning or group of meanings of ‘relative’ that seems most natural from a sociological point of view, from the meaning or group of meanings which is most obvious and usual from a philosophical point of view. From a sociological point of view, the relation implied in affirming ‘relativity’ of knowledge or truth would be a relation to the structure or functioning of the social organism
to which we conceive the beliefs in question to belong, or a relation to the end of social self-preservation to which all the organic functions of the organism are, as we have seen, normally adapted. From a philosophical point of view, on the other hand, when 'relativity' is affirmed of any piece of apparent knowledge, there are two obvious alternative relations which may be implied, *prima facie* different from the meaning just mentioned, viz. (1) relation of an object known to the knowing mind, and (2) relation to some other object of knowledge. The latter relation is very important in studying the theory of knowledge, but it does not concern us here; for in the present discussion we are assuming a distinction between relative truth and absolute truth, or relative knowledge and knowledge of absolute reality; and, so far as I know or can conceive, the condition of knowing whatever particular thing or truth I may know in relation to some other thing or truth—the other thing being possibly, in the case of a whole, a part of itself—this condition must apply to knowledge of absolute truth or the most real reality, no less than to knowledge of the relative. Whether Space really exists or is merely a form of sense-perception, I must cognise any particular portion of matter which I perceive as in relation to other things in space: whether Time is real or not, I must conceive any change as in relation to antecedent and subsequent changes in time: whether my general conceptions represent absolute realities or merely phenomena, I must conceive the individuals included under any such
resemblance as related in the way of resemblance. Even if the real was found on analysis to consist entirely of such relations—as is held by one school of metaphysicians—still the 'relativity' in this sense that was found to be the essence of absolute reality would not be the kind of relativity into which we are now inquiring: for the essential inter-relatedness of reality does not enable us to conceive how the different views of truth held at successive stages of development should all be equally true. For the present, therefore, I confine myself, from the philosophical point of view, to the consideration of 'relativity' in the sense in which it implies some relation of the object known to the knowing mind: and I think it will be convenient to examine first this philosophical sense of 'relativity' and then to proceed to discuss the sociological sense before distinguished.

Now I do not say that no useful meaning can be given to the propositions that 'all our knowledge is relative' to the knowing mind or subject, and that the truth attainable by us is in this sense only relative truth. But so far as I understand the sense in which these propositions are ordinarily enunciated, I certainly think that they contain considerably more error or confusion of thought than truth. If, indeed, it is merely meant that we can only know what is related to our faculty of knowledge, the proposition is at once incontrovertible and insignificant. It is obvious that we can only know what is knowable, and no one ever supposed that we could know what is unknowable. But if the proposition means that we
cannot know things as they are in themselves, then—
though experience does not justify me in giving it a
complete denial—we may fairly say that the proposi-
tion expresses the limits of our knowledge and not its
essential nature. Briefly I should say that in this
sense our knowledge is relative only so far as it is not
completely knowledge, does not completely realise our
general idea of true knowledge. It is essential to
this idea that what we know really is as we know it;
but the long process of human error which it is the
painful experience of the student of history to survey
prevents our affirming with perfect confidence that
any portion even of what we now take for scientific
knowledge completely realises this idea. But, I
maintain, so far as we are right in regarding it as
knowledge, real, though not complete, we are right in
assuming that the object known really is as we
apparently know it; though it may, of course, have
other qualities and characteristics which we do not
know. If therefore we are to use the term 'relative
knowledge or truth' with a meaning at once precise
and useful (from a philosophical as distinct from a
sociological point of view) I think it can only mean
'the best approximation to knowledge or truth'
attainable by the mind to which the knowledge is
affirmed to be relative.

I shall have occasion to illustrate this in consider-
ing the more properly sociological view of 'relativity
of knowledge.' What from this point of view is the
relation implied? The meaning that it seems to me
natural for the sociologist to take, who is contemplat-
ing belief as a social fact, is that the relation is relation to the end of social preservation:—this being the great end to which the whole gradual complex differentiation of social structure as well as the whole combination and mutual dependence of social functions are held to be normally conducive. Or again, 'relative' may mean conducive not to preservation alone but to development or well-being. The difference of the three notions, Preservation, Development, Welfare, is important, and I shall return to it hereafter: but at present I would take the conception of what I may call the sociological end as vaguely representing the three. It is relativity to this end conceived in one or other form that seems to be often meant by the assertion that certain political beliefs were relatively true at the times they were prevalent: the belief in the Divine right of kings at one stage of political development, or at another the belief in an original contract constituting the society and determining the mutual rights of governor and governed. What seems to be meant is that it was expedient for the preservation or development or well-being of the society that these should be currently held. But if this is all that 'relative truth' means, then though the word 'relative' is appropriate enough, the word 'truth' is singularly inappropriate. For we are familiar in ordinary life with beliefs which it is or seems expedient for the society or the individual, under certain conditions, to hold, but which we should never think of calling true, because we know them not to correspond to the facts. If, in order to keep a
child from eating plums off a tree in the garden to the
detriment of its health, I tell it that there is a wolf
lying hidden that will probably pounce upon it if it
touches the plums, I endeavour to impart a belief that
I feel it to be expedient for the individual child to
hold: but I do not therefore call it 'true'—not even
'relatively true.' I know there is no wolf there, so
that expediency and truth fall completely apart.

It may be answered 'Yes, they fall apart for you,
but not perhaps for the child:' the child can only
effectively hold the belief that it ought not to eat the
plums in the form of a belief that a wolf's pounce
or something else disagreeable that it can definitely
imagine may befall it if it eats them.' Now here we
must distinguish the general notion of something
disagreeable, and the particular image of a wolf
pouncing. Those who are familiar with ethical con-
troversy know that it is a view held by many that
the only real meaning of the assertion 'I ought not to
do so and so' is that something disagreeable will
happen to me if I do. This is not my view: I do not
hold that the moral judgment has only this egoistic
significance: I have argued strongly against this view,
and for the essential disinterestedness of our common
judgments of right and wrong. But there certainly
seem to be not a few persons whose minds cannot
find a place for this conception of a disinterested
'ought.' Let us suppose that theirs is the true view:
that when the proposition 'I ought to do this' is true
it is always also true that 'some harm will happen to
me if I do not do it,' and that this second proposition
gives the real meaning of the first. Let us grant, what experience certainly indicates, that the 'harm' in some cases is only moral harm, interference with moral growth; but we may still suppose that it is necessarily conceived as physical harm—pain of some kind—by children generally, or by societies in an early stage. Let us suppose this: then we may say, returning to our plums and wolf, that the general idea we wish to convey to the child—that something disagreeable will happen to it—is relatively true: it is ethical truth in the only form in which the child's mind can take it in: but that the image of the wolf is altogether fictitious, though it may be an expedient fiction as the easiest or only means effective to induce the child to accept the relative truth.

I have tried to make this distinction clear, because I admit the 'relativity of truth' in ethics and politics up to a certain point, and therefore it becomes important to distinguish in current beliefs the element of relative truth from the element of expedient fiction. We may apply it to the fundamental political beliefs of the earlier period of modern European history—the period leading up to the French Revolution—the belief in the natural rights of man and the social contract as a means of preserving them. We may regard it as a relative truth that a man had a natural right to Freedom, as being the only form in which the proposition that a man ought to have freedom in a well-ordered society could be then strongly held: but the belief that our ancestors had actually had this freedom in a state of nature, and had formally resigned
it by entering into a social compact, is not properly regarded as a relative truth, but only as a fiction, an erroneous belief possibly convenient as a means for conveying the relative truth into minds on which the relative truth alone would not take sufficiently strong hold without the fiction.

This being granted, we have now to observe that a reasoned judgment as to the relative truth or the partial fictitiousness of a current belief requires us to suppose ourselves in possession of absolute ethical truth—or at any rate to suppose our own belief so much nearer the truth than the current belief we are examining that we take it as an absolute standard for judging the current belief. For to know that any belief is fictitious, i.e. not correspondent to fact, we must suppose ourselves to know what the fact is. Again, to know that any ethical or political belief is expedient though false, we must know that it is the best available means to the attainment of the right end: we must know therefore what the right end is, wherein social well-being, etc., consists, and be able to judge of the conduciveness of means to the end. The latter we may learn from Sociology, as Sociology progresses; but what the end is at which we ought to aim we cannot learn from Sociology. Any judgment we make as to the rightness of a practical end—that it is an end we ought to aim at—must be a fundamental ethical judgment; which we cannot regard as in its turn a merely relative truth.
§ 1. We have noted that though the ascertainment of the antecedents of a belief cannot furnish a cogent demonstration of its falsity—not even when we find false beliefs among these antecedents—still the mere contemplation of the diversity and change in beliefs which human history exhibits in such subjects as Ethics, Politics, and Theology, which are still in a condition of fundamental controversy, has a tendency to produce an attitude of general scepticism with regard to them. The question then is whether Sociology, attaining a knowledge of laws of change and development in this department of social fact, can cure the scepticism which history alone, presenting us with a mere spectacle of diversity and conflict, tends to produce. There appear to be two chief ways of meeting this scepticism, which I distinguished as Relativism and Progressivism.

The former, while resigning the hope of attaining 'absolute truth,' affirms that the diverse beliefs of different ages are all 'relatively true.' In interpreting the ambiguous term 'relative' I distinguished the
meaning that properly belongs to the philosophical point of view—where 'relative' is contrasted with 'absolute' knowledge—from that which properly belongs to the sociological point of view. From the philosophical point of view, I took 'relative' to mean 'in relation to the knowing mind.' I pointed out that if it be merely meant that the fundamental beliefs of past ages were, and the divergent beliefs of other contemporary Societies are, normal to the human mind in a certain stage of its development, and ours can be no more, then this notion of relative hides a purely sceptical view. The 'relatively true' beliefs are none the less contradictory for being in a sense normal; and if we once conceive our own fundamental beliefs to be beliefs which a future generation will discard as erroneous, exactly as we have discarded those of the past, then I do not see how, while regarding them thus, they can maintain anything like the same hold over our minds as they would if we regarded them as absolutely true.¹ The only point of knowledge, free from scepticism, is just this relativity, and we cannot really conceive any further progress as regards this fundamental distinction of relative and absolute.

If again the term 'relatively true' is interpreted so as to avoid this scepticism, it must mean either that the past belief so described was the nearest approximation to the truth which the human mind in this particular stage of its development could reach, or

¹ The word 'true' has no magic to neutralise the scepticism latent in the word 'relative.'
that such belief was expedient, though wholly or partially false.

The latter brings us to the meaning of 'relative' which is most appropriate from the sociological point of view: i.e. implying relation as a means to an end of social preservation or welfare. But to know that an ethical or political belief, prevalent in a past age, was expedient though wholly or partially false, we must know that it was a means to the attainment of the end—whether defined as social preservation, social welfare, or otherwise—by conduciveness to which expediency is properly estimated; and similarly, in order to judge on adequate grounds that a belief is partially or approximately true, we must ourselves be in possession, if not of absolute truth on the subject, at any rate of something which we have reason to regard as a nearer approximation. In either case we assume ourselves to be in a fundamentally superior position, in respect of truth and knowledge, to that of the past age which we are judging. But, on the one hand, it is difficult to see how a purely sociological study of belief as a social fact with no other criterion of truth than sociology affords can justify us in making this assumption; while, on the other hand, if we do make it, we thereby introduce so fundamental a difference between the present age and all past ages that it is difficult to see how a study of the changes of belief in the past can enable us to predict the future course of its development.

§ 2. Here, however, it may be said that this impartial relativism pure and simple, which I have
described, though it may be entertained by some students of the history of thought who have had no training in modern science nor attained a grasp of its methods, is not the view of the properly trained sociologist; for the characteristic of the sociologist, as distinct from the ordinary historian, is that he applies the methods of modern science to the study of human society. He regards sociology as the latest-born of the sciences, and so regarding it he necessarily accepts as valid, speaking broadly, the methods and conclusions of the other sciences and the general view of human thought and its objects which the modern sciences in the aggregate, when systematised by philosophy, are found to involve or suggest. And therefore, it may be said, he does not and cannot come to the scientific study of the history of belief as a social fact, without any other criterion than sociology itself affords: he necessarily has in his mind, whether implicitly or explicitly, the view of truth and its criteria which follows from assuming the general truth of the conclusions of the established and recognised sciences, and the validity of their methods—as to which there is no longer any general dispute or doubt among educated persons. He does not, of course, assume that these sciences are free from error, or that the human intellect has reached finality even in the most advanced of them: but he does assume that, in the vast region of thought covered by them, the human mind has found out the right way, after trying wrong ways: and consequently in forecasting the future development of thought he assumes that
there will be no such fundamental changes as have taken place in the long struggle through error to truth which history shows us in the past. Making these assumptions, he finds in the history of thought a progress towards truth and knowledge; and thinks himself justified in inferring, with more or less confidence, that the progress will continue in the future. But he forecasts this progress differently, according as it is conceived to relate (1) to the sciences or systems of thought which have already emerged from the state of fundamental controversy, or (2) to those other parts of our thought that are still imperfectly organised, still struggling with fundamental controversies. As regards the former, the progress that may be expected will more or less resemble that which has taken place in them in the latest, strictly modern stage of their past history: while in the case of the latter—to which Ethics and Politics belong—the progress may be expected to imitate more or less the earlier struggle.

It is in this way, as we before saw, that Auguste Comte obtains his generalisations as to the ‘three stages’ through which a science has to pass: according to him, the sciences now clearly established are so because they have arrived at the ‘positive’ stage, after passing through the ‘theological’ and ‘metaphysical’ stages. At the positive stage they confine themselves to investigating the laws of phenomena; whereas at the theological stage, in a vain pursuit of the causes of events, they referred them to the volitions of imaginary quasi-human beings, and at the metaphysical stage, carrying on the same vain pursuit,
they referred them to occult incognisable substances or essences. In the physical sciences then, these vain pursuits are now abandoned: whereas politics, he says, is still partly in the metaphysical stage, so far as its reasonings are based on the conception of certain abstract rights; while ethics is even still further back in the theological stage. He draws, therefore, from history the simple lesson that these backward studies should follow the course of development of the more successful physical sciences and become positive in their method.

You observe that Comte uses the terms ‘theological’ and ‘metaphysical’ to denote not spheres of legitimate inquiry, but forms of error: and that the error is twofold: in either case questions are asked which it is vain to ask, and also answers are given which there is no warrant for giving. The error in questioning was in the attempt to know realities and their causes, instead of acquiescing in the knowable limitations which restrict us to the knowledge of phenomena and their laws.

This doctrine, therefore, combines a belief in the Relativity of knowledge, in the philosophical sense, with a belief in the Progress of knowledge: and in Comte’s view the combination is fundamentally important. Still the combination is in no way necessary: in fact the majority of scientific men hold with Comte that our knowledge at the present day is essentially and vastly in advance of what was taken for knowledge in preceding ages, without also holding that we cannot know realities.
§ 3. We may thus, then, pass from a consideration of what I called Relativism to a consideration of what I called Progressivism, the doctrine that the changes which history shows us in the prevalent beliefs of, let us say, our own society, exhibit a progress from less to more of knowledge and truth.

Now here I ought to say at once, that of the truth of this doctrine, in a broad and general sense, I have no doubt. And speaking broadly we may say that there is no doubt of it in the mind of our age. The extremest scepticism, at the present day, is limited by a belief in the validity of the methods and conclusions of physical science, which carries with it a belief in the steady growth of physical knowledge. This is a fundamental difference between the thought of our age and that not merely of the ancient world, but of a time so near us as the age of Descartes. When Descartes, at the outset of his independent investigation of truth, cleared his mind of many traditional and doubtful matters, he seems to have had no more difficulty in clearing out traditional physical science than anything else. But for a modern thinker any similar clearance—except as a conscious methodological artifice—would be forced and insincere. The question for us is not whether there has been progress in the attainment of truth in the study of the physical world: it can only be either (1) as to the nature and limits of this progress, or (2) as to the validity of the inferences drawn from it, in respect of knowledge generally, and especially of the prospects and means of progress in other departments.
These questions I propose to consider in the next lecture. At present it seems to me desirable, as a preliminary, to examine the notion of Progress rather from a sociological point of view. From a philosophical point of view, we might concentrate attention on progress in knowledge; but from the sociological point of view we have to consider this special kind of progress in relation to progress in society generally. Now of these two notions it is obvious the narrower—progress in knowledge—is comparatively simple and clear: at least any serious student of whatever subject knows what it is to acquire new knowledge and to get rid of errors and confusions of thought in his old knowledge—or what he took for such. But the wider notion 'social progress,' though no less familiar, is, in ordinary thought, much vaguer. An American poet, in verses whose popularity shows the effectiveness of the appeal, gives it as the fundamental duty of man

... to act that each to-morrow
Find us further than to-day.

But 'further' towards what? I am inclined to think that not a few enthusiasts for Progress might with truth adopt the frank declaration of another transatlantic bard, who tells his fellow-men and readers:

I have urged you forward and still urge you—
Without the slightest idea of our destination.

Let us then first try to get as clear as we can the wider notion of social progress, as preliminary to an
examination of the narrower notion of progress in knowledge or the possession of truth.

We may first make the notion more distinct by excluding the old idea of a periodic or cyclical course of changes, for which however, as I would show if I had time, the facts of history give some support, especially in the succession of forms of polity. But even where the notion of a recurring series of changes is most in harmony with the facts, it never corresponds to more than one part or aspect of the facts: the later series always differs from the earlier, to which it bears some analogy, in characteristics of great and fundamental importance; the question therefore remains whether, so far as we consider the course of social change in its non-periodic aspect, we find progress in it, and what progress.

Now in ordinary thought and life we are in the habit of conceiving progress as movement towards an end which is ultimately attained, so that the progress can be measured simply by diminishing distance from the end. Thus in any journey we make progress till we arrive at our destination; so in most definite pieces of work—building a house, writing a book, etc.—the conception of progress is inseparable from the anticipation of completion and attainment, an anticipation which is normally realised: the house gets built, the

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1 For example, the evolution of the West European Country-state in medieval and modern history has some remarkable analogies to the evolution of the Greek City-state in old Græco-Roman history.

2 For example, in making the comparison suggested in the previous note, we have to observe the great differences due to slavery, monotheistic religion, development of industry, etc.
book gets written, and the series of progressive changes comes to an end with the complete attainment of the planned result.

Now a similar notion seems to me very commonly applied, with more or less distinctness, in current discourses and schemes of political and social progress. The party of progress conceive a condition of things—a new distribution of political power, or a new distribution of wealth, or perhaps universal peace, or all these together—which they hope to realise, if not within their own lifetime, at any rate within a period comparatively short when measured in relation to the whole life of human society; and they conceive the realisation of this condition as giving so much satisfaction that the present political and social movement and unrest will cease and social repose follow—the repose of a social mind satisfied. But history gives no support to this notion; at least, the satisfaction and repose attained by any movement of political and social change in the past have never been more than partial and transient; and there is no reason to think it will be otherwise in the future.

I think, therefore, that, if we are to have a practically useful notion of social progress, we must not take the conception of a condition to be realised in which the progress is to terminate and the 'repose of a mind satisfied' to be won, as inseparable from the notion of progress. And indeed when we consider the deepest aims of a purposeful human life, we find that a notion of progress, quite apart from any hoped-for arrival at rest or termination of movement, is
familiar at least to thoughtful persons. Thus a man of moral aspirations aims at progress in virtue, a man of intellectual aspirations at progress in knowledge, but in neither case is there any termination to the progress even hoped for, at least in earthly life; no one hopes to become perfectly virtuous or to attain complete knowledge. The pursuit of virtue, he knows, is one in which he can only arrive, by the utmost effort, at a somewhat closer approximation to an ideal which he can never hope actually to attain. Indeed the pursuit is, often at least, like a climb in which 'Alps on Alps arise,' since in proportion as a man's moral consciousness is developed, he feels the gap between his actual conduct and his ideal of conduct: he sees more clearly what he might have been and done, and how unlike it is to what he has been and done. And much the same may be said of knowledge: those who know most are those who see most clearly how much remains unknown; how on all sides round the small island of known fact which the human mind possesses, there stretches a vast, vague ocean of the unknown—not to speak of the pools and marshes and bottomless pits of error which are from time to time discovered in the island itself. Progress, in short, in virtue or in knowledge, as the experience of the individual declares, is progress towards an ideal more and more distinctly recognised to be beyond attainment, though we may advance in the direction of it.

But it still remains to ask what is the direction of progress? If, as our poet says, we are 'to act that each to-morrow find us further than to-day' from
the point at which our progress began, what is—to use our poet’s words—the ‘destined end or goal’ towards which the progress is tending, even if we may never expect to reach it? Now here a distinction of meanings or applications in the notion ‘End’ comes into view. There are no less than three such meanings, prima facie distinct, all of which naturally come into this investigation:—(1) We may accept—

with certain qualifications—the view of Society as an organism. This implies that there is adjustment or adaptation of the different elements of the aggregate social structure to the preservation of the organism under its conditions of existence. The ‘End’ therefore, in a sense, of the adaptation or adjustment is the preservation of the organism: that is, it is a result which each particular adaptation or adjustment attains in some measure—otherwise we should not call it adaptation or adjustment. (2) But in this sense ‘End’ is not necessarily to be regarded as a goal or ultimate result, towards which the series of changes are a progress, or which they are progressively realising: just as those who have affirmed that his own happiness is always the end of an individual man’s striving have not intended to affirm that happiness is progressively realised in the series of changes that constitutes the life of the individual. Nor again does the ‘End,’ as meaning the preservation of the organism, give us any clue to the direction in which the series of self-adaptive changes is tending; for it is simply a common characteristic of all organisms, in fact what constitutes their essentially
organic character, that organic change has this tendency; while (3) the result to which, according to Sociological inquiry, we seem to be probably tending may be different from what our reason approves as an ethical or political end—an end which we ought to aim at realising.

Meaning then by 'End,' as implied in the term 'organism,' that the complex structure and mutually dependent functions of the parts of an organism are adapted or adjusted to the attainment of a certain result, namely, the preservation of the organism under its conditions of existence, are we to understand that social progress lies in the increase of this adaptation or adjustment, in the fact that the structure of the society becomes continually more adapted to preserve itself under the conditions of its existence? There can be no doubt that an important part of the changes which history shows us have the character of being such adaptations to meet changes in internal or external conditions. But this alone does not justify us in concluding that the social organism is on the whole progressing in self-preservation qualities: as the changes within and without it may be unfavourable to its preservation to an extent that may outweigh the advantages of the adaptive changes. We may find instances of political changes, which though they may undoubtedly be regarded as self-adaptive alterations of the political society in which they occur, cannot be shown to have given the particular society in question or its type an increased prospect of self-preservation. Consider for instance the political
changes to which I just now referred when mentioning the general notion of cyclical or periodic movement. The movement towards popular government which appears to begin in Greece in the seventh century,\(^1\) seems to be due to a combination of causes, including a movement of political thought of which I will speak presently. But without at present analysing the causes of the movement, or distinguishing its nobler and baser elements, we may say that neither observation of its nature, nor a general survey of its historic effects would lead us to regard it as being decidedly a preservative adaptation of the political societies in which it is realised. Certainly no Greek observer conceived democracy to be for the advantage of a Greek city-state in the struggle for existence: and in medieval Italy it is the Venetian oligarchy, and not any more popular constitution, which seems to stand first in the possession of self-preservation qualities.

And the same may be said of the other changes which, taken together, make up what we commonly conceive as ‘progress in civilisation’: i.e. the development of the arts of industry, and of the fine arts, including literature, and developments of habits of peaceful and orderly living, both of which co-operate in increasing mutual communication among human beings and so in causing an extension of sociality and sympathy. In two ways, indeed, this group of more or less connected changes is socially preservative; so far as it increases the power of the society and its

\(^1\) Cf. above, p. 198 n.
members to adapt their physical environment to the satisfaction of their needs and desires, and so far as it increases the internal cohesion of the society through the repression of disorderly violence and the expansion of sympathy. On the other hand, so far as the development of habits of peaceful industry and trade tends to unfit its members, physically or morally, for war and martial exercises, it is a dangerous source of weakness in conflicts with other social groups. Indeed history shows us several striking instances of the conquest of more civilised states by less civilised, owing to the superiority of the latter in fighting qualities. The most impressive example, for Europeans, is the conquest of the Western Empire by the Teutonic tribes. It was a main cause of this event that the civilised Roman provincial did not like fighting, and the barbarian did; so that the armies of the Empire came to be more and more composed of barbarians, who were thus trained and disciplined for the civilised 'art of war': until the time came when the overwhelming preponderance of fighting force possessed by the Teutonic tribes, inside and outside the imperial armies, was too palpable a fact to be effectually obscured by the traditional prestige of the Roman state and the politic skill of the Roman governing class.

It would seem, then, that at any rate a very important part of the changes which history shows us in human societies have no marked tendency to make them more adapted to self-preservation under the conditions of their existence.
§ 4. Let us now turn from the general question that we have been considering to examine the special case of changes in prevalent beliefs—with which, in this course of lectures, I am specially concerned.

It must be observed that the notion of 'progress' in this special department is likely to be understood—even by sociologists—in what I have regarded as its philosophical rather than its primarily sociological meaning: i.e. as progress in truth, either in respect of extent of truth known or of freedom from error. Such a progress we all accept as a fact in some departments at least: but, as I have already argued at some length, the sociologist pure and simple has no scientific right to assume it with regard to beliefs in general. For he cannot assume it without at the same time assuming implicitly a criterion of truth in general: and such a criterion it is the primary business of philosophy, not of sociology as such, to establish. If we keep strictly to the sociological point of view, we shall properly consider 'progress' as applied to changes in beliefs as a special case of the general notion of social progress: and the question we shall primarily raise with regard to such changes will be not whether a given series of changes historically surveyed is in the direction of truth, but whether it is in the direction of expediency for the social organism, whether it tends continually to increase the social organism's power of preserving itself under the conditions of its existence. This is the primary question prescribed by the changes in prevalent beliefs from a sociological point of view;
and—for a reason that will appear hereafter—it is important to examine it separately from the question as to the tendency of such changes in the direction of truth.

Let us ask then how far we can reasonably regard the general process of social adaptation to the environment—especially through the struggle for existence among societies and the survival of the fittest society—as having operated to bring into existence beliefs tending to the preservation of the society.

Certainly this last cause may be held in prehistoric times to have tended to promote the increase of knowledge of natural phenomena, through the increased means of supplying human wants which attends it. 'Necessity is the mother of invention,' and invention depends on observation and forecast of natural facts; and industrial inventions are, speaking broadly, conducive to the preservation of the society in which they occur and may be assumed to have given inventive societies an advantage in the struggle for existence with other societies: though as inventions spread through imitation, the advantage would be proportionally shared by imitative neighbours. And we can conceive that natural selection among societies may have similarly operated to keep in existence religious beliefs conducive to social preservation in primitive ages. For example, if ancestor worship led to energetic and harmonious co-operation, then the tribe that did not worship its ancestors, becoming slack and quarrelsome, would be so much the more likely to be conquered by the ancestor worshippers.
But we cannot reasonably regard this as the sole or even the main part of the explanation of the movement of beliefs even in primitive ages: because it is obviously a cause that has no great effect as regards the important changes in beliefs known to have taken place in the historic period. For no civilised society, in the historic development of European civilisation, has suffered destruction such that its beliefs died with it. Take the case of Greece: it may be suggested that the philosophic criticism of current polytheism, by which—as we perceive from Greek literature—the influence of religion on the sentiments of cultivated society was weakened, made the Greek States somewhat weaker in the struggle for political existence. Now let us suppose for the sake of argument—it would be a fantastic hypothesis—that this was so in the struggle with Rome, and that the Romans had an important advantage in being more genuinely attached to their deities. Still Greek polity did not perish in any sense which made Greek beliefs perish: as we all know, it was quite the contrary—

Græcia capta forum victorem cepit.

So again if we turn to the momentous change of beliefs effected in the second and third centuries of our era, the struggle for existence among political societies has obviously no effect in bringing it about. It is within the region subject to settled and stable Roman dominion that the change goes on.

Nor is there indeed any adequate evidence that the historic changes in religious beliefs have had any
general tendency to preserve the particular societies in which they occurred from the only kind of death which historically known human societies have had seriously to dread—destruction by foreign enemies. Take the case last mentioned. I see no reason to think that Christianity had a preservative effect on the Roman Empire. Probably before Constantine, its operation was the other way. As we know, in the view of primitive Christians, ordinary human society was a world temporarily surrendered to Satanic rule, over which a swift and sudden destruction was impending: the passive alienation from secular work and aims, and the decline of patriotic sentiment which this view carried with it, could hardly fail to be a source of weakness and danger to the political system: indeed we may attribute the Decian persecutions largely to a sense of this growing danger. The action of Constantine, again, was no doubt largely determined by a desire to heal the split between religion and the state: and this was certainly a political advantage. But apart from the removal of this drawback and danger caused by the spread of Christianity, it is difficult to see that Christianity after Constantine had any preservative efficacy for Roman political society: the Empire seems to be steadily declining in the fourth and fifth centuries.

No doubt, in the social chaos to which the barbarian invasions reduced the Western Empire, the Church was of great value to civilisation as a source of unity to the whole West-European State-system—though of disintegration sometimes to particular
states. When the Empire broke up, the Church held together and held Western Europe together. But it is the vigorous *community* of belief that had this binding force, rather than its specifically Christian character.

Observe, I am not disputing the general value— even the indispensability—of religion as a social force. I am only arguing that when we examine, from a purely sociological point of view, the changes in religious beliefs, with the view of ascertaining the laws of change, we can find no evidence in the historic period of a clear general tendency in these changes to promote the preservation of the social organism in which they take place; and have therefore no adequate ground for assuming such a general tendency in the primitive period.

Somewhat the same may be said of changes in political beliefs—beliefs as to what ought to be in the structure of government and its relations to the governed—so far as history shows us such changes. No doubt political beliefs are strongly influenced by the struggles for existence of the societies in which they are prevalent. Thus beliefs hostile to existing political order tend to diminish in crises of national struggle with other nations, from the strongly felt advantage of internal harmony and cohesion. A war, at least of defence, strengthens the position of rulers whose military management is successful: on the other hand, reverses in war favour the growth of beliefs hostile to government. But though, in tracing the history of political beliefs, this is an influence not
to be neglected, it cannot be said to give the main law of their development. Consider, for instance, the change in political ideas which, as I have said, has—more than once, in human history—preceded and partly caused the transition to democracy. The causes are surely to be sought in the general desire of human beings as individuals to better their condition, and enjoy a larger share of the means of happiness, co-operating with the ethico-political conviction that any man—or any freeman—has as much right as any other to determine how the matters of common interest should be carried on. This movement, wisely directed and moderated, may, no doubt, strengthen the political society in which it takes place for international struggles; but certainly history does not show a general tendency to this result: the experience of Greece seems rather to have been that it had a preponderantly disintegrative effect, producing, as Plato says, "two hostile states—the rich and the poor—within the limits of one."

I turn now to an objection which may have long since occurred to my readers. "You have been talking," it may be said, "all along of Preservation of Society as the end of adaptations, and of increase in self-preservative qualities as the essence of progress. But surely Preservation alone, bare continuance of existence, is not a worthy end; nor does this represent our idea of progress, nor is the contemplation of it capable of stirring the springs of political and social activity. This is aimed not at mere Being, but Well-being. By progress, we mean improvement, the
passage from a worse to a better condition. Political beliefs—at any rate at the present stage of development of civilised Society—are beliefs as to what ought to be done, in the organisation and functioning of government, to bring about a better condition of society; and the interesting question in any general study of history, in order to ascertain the law of development, is how far things are tending to improvement of social life.” In all this I entirely agree: and have only appeared to ignore it so far from a desire to keep strictly to the sociological point of view. If we introduce the notion of ‘improvement,’ and insist on thinking with method and precision, we require some definite criterion and measure of ‘good.’