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BIBLIOTHECA SACRA.

ARTICLE I.

COMPETENCE OF IMAGINATION TO SERVE THE TRUTH.

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THIS will not, it is hoped, be thought an audacious article. It undertakes merely to tell of something which is going on in ordinary minds without drawing due attention, and which had better be told in order that its importance may be weighed.

Certain convictions about God and his ways with men are strangely persistent. Reason has never hastened to welcome them, although it has often tried to adjust itself to these convictions, and even to justify them. They persist because they have laid hold on the Christian imagination. The less welcome to reason their persistence, the more evidently it is due to imagination. Indeed, precisely the doctrines that stagger imagination commend themselves to it in some aspect, possibly by their very boldness.

It does not follow that the Christian imagination readily yields to delusions. It would even seem likely that there is "something in" ideas about God and his work which are durably fascinating to good and not unenlightened people. At least the attempt will be made to show what

claim imagination may put forward as a guide to truth. If this exploration takes us a little way underground, where the light is dim, I trust that we may catch the pleasant smell of newly turned earth, and not the musty odors of a neglected basement.

A CONCESSION AND A CLAIM.

It is agreed that the poet is a seer. When imagination accepts the shackles of metre and rhyme, it passes for Sir Oracle; but if it makes free to go in prose, what people think, is plainly enough intimated by the phrase "purely imaginary." Nevertheless, the imagination is a potent, trusty, and widely available instrument for discovery of truth. And it is a discoverer by being first a critic. This claim, although it may seem overbold, is also hinted at in familiar speech by the word "unimaginable." That is, the last and irreversible verdict against any alleged state of facts is felt to be, that such a state of facts cannot even be imagined.

In calling imagination a faculty of criticism it is not implied that imagination actually passes judgment upon anything. This is the office of reason, with its strange power of beholding fundamental truth face to face; or of the understanding, with its ability to compare, to recognize identity and difference, and to draw inferences. But it is meant that imagination is often able to prepare and present so accurately and so vividly the matter on which judgment is needed, that a verdict is given at once and finally. Such an achievement makes imagination seem like an immediate vision of truth, and justifies the figure of speech that directly ascribes to her the judgment which she alone makes possible so promptly, or even makes possible at all. It was in this sense that Professor Tyndall, in accounting for the colors seen in those remote fields of air which science may never explore, said, "The scientific

imagination . . . is here authoritative."[1] Such a figure will spare us a deal of detailed and analytical phraseology, after this disclaimer of literalness ought not to be misunderstood, and will serve the present purpose by emphasizing the continuous and invaluable but generally overlooked service of imagination to religious thought.

It is worth remarking, as we go down to the foundations, how different is the method of imagination in searching out the truth from its method in public teaching. In that case it fronts the reality; in this, often approaches it sidewise. Only mental confusion can arise from any theological office of imagination not straightforward: but its rhetorical charm is often in unlooked-for obliquity of method. This conspicuously, when resort is had to figures of speech, such as metaphor and hyperbole. In making use of these figures, one never says what he means, nor means what he says. He utters a kind of riddle, and the riddle is pleasing if at once fit and strange. Rhetorical imagination seeks to illumine the truth by pretending to disguise it; but in determining what is true, imagination strives to penetrate all disguises and to fix a steady eye upon reality. Tyndall claimed this "scientific use of imagination." Is an instrument so powerful in physical investigation as he showed it to be, utterly useless in the inquiry for religious truth? We must note, in passing, what amounts to a singular denial of imagination's real and high competence, all in claiming for it, with some enthusiasm, an inferior competence.

Years ago the brilliant Horace Bushnell,[2] and more recently the heart-compelling Henry Drummond,[3] taught that imagination is the sole arbiter of faith, because religious truth can be set forth only in figures of speech. Christ,

[1] Fragments of Science, p. 431.
[2] God in Christ, chap. i.; Building Eras, chap. viii.
[3] New Evangelism, pp. 38–55.

exclaims Bushnell, is "God's last metaphor!" Imagination he defines as "the power that distinguishes truths in their images, and seizes hold of images for the expression of truths." His main ground for denying that religious and, as he says, philosophical truths can have a more exact expression is, that names of physical things used figuratively are the only names for spiritual and mental things. Hence, says he, if any one asks, "Is there any hope for theologic science left? None at all, I answer most unequivocally."

But it may be contended as unequivocally that, while figurative terms are the only terms for mental and spiritual realities, those terms may have distinguishable meanings; that, while certain of these realities are too vast or too vague to be known distinctly and described accurately, a large proportion of them can be known well enough to justify saying something about them; that what can be said can be said in the order of the relations between the objects,—and lo! a science of those objects. Thus what we know about moral and religious truth can be reduced to "propositional statements," and in this definite form may be laid hold of by imagination; then experience tests it, and so fixes it in the faith of the Christian ages.

It is possible, for example, to say with "propositional" definiteness, that God is a personal Spirit infinite in all excellencies; that man has an imperishable soul, is naturally prone to sin, and has before him a destiny determined by what he is; that Christ had no human father, and that, by virtue of what he was and is, what he bore, did, and does, he has made every provision required by the holy nature of God and the fallen estate of man to deliver men from the power and the penalties of sin. Whatever variety of meanings each term is capable of, one of the meanings can be fixed upon, and it then becomes possible to affirm or to deny the truth of these propositions. The list of them

need not be extended. These sufficiently indicate how different what Dr. Bushnell and Professor Drummond undertook to show is from what I now essay. In a word, whatever the risks of partial knowledge, it is, so far, knowledge. We need not conclude that we do not know anything about a subject unless we know everything about it, that imagination cannot adequately picture a part unless she can picture the whole.

HOW IMAGINATION PLAYS THE CRITIC.

Here is the sub-cellar; but there is light enough to see the bed-rock by, and the great foundation stones. How imagination is qualified to play the critic is not so very difficult to understand. Imagination is image–ination, the mind's power of picturing to itself things, or even abstractions; of seeing the invisible; or, according to an intelligible if hardly elegant phrase, imagination is "a realizing sense" of objects not before the senses. This last phrase intimates two elements in the function of imagining: mental seeing, and vividness of mental seeing.

The ability of the mind to judge and discover by imagining is found, to begin with, in the mind's ability to see. In regard to sensible objects, imagination produces in their absence as nearly as it can the mental apprehension of them which their presence would afford through the senses. Without physical sensation of light, the mind achieves a mental perception of light. In the same figurative way, imagination might be called the mind's hearing, smelling, tasting. If it deals with objects not of sense, imagination attempts a depiction of them to one's self as though these objects were appreciable by sensation. In so doing it may either set up a symbol of them, often, as Dr. Bushnell claims that imagination always must, constructing a metaphor for them; or it may by sheer force press into the mind an assurance of the truth in these abstrac-

tions. Imagination platonizes. To imagination universal truths are basilar realities. This latter is its way when it gives largest aid to those reasonings about abstract truth which are the high function of rationality, and which imagination thus rescues from being mere processes of formal logic, a juggle with algebraic formulas. It is a remarkable faculty,—imagination. One can hardly think of another faculty more indicative of power in the mind than that the mind can see. And so imagination undertakes its part in the office of criticism by virtue of the fact that it holds before the mind the objects to be judged. How else can the critical process go on? How else can it so much as begin? Neglecting imagination, the mind is blindfolded. It moves among its treasures, and they trip it, bewilder it, hurt and disable it.

But imagination is also, of its very nature, *distinctness* of mental vision. If with any fitness it can be called "a realizing sense," this is because imagination sees the unseen vividly enough to get a strong impression of its reality. If any good is to come of imagining, it must be proportioned to the liveliness of the imagining. Nothing dimly seen by the eye is well enough seen, and nothing feebly imagined is safely imagined. The poet's gift is preeminently that of liveliness in imagination. If we looked no further into his gift, it would at least be evident that he is a seer because *his mind sees clearly*.

To be sure, this knack of almost cajoling one's self into believing that he sees what he boldly pictures to himself, gives an imaginative person an ill name for veracity. It is not to be denied that, while we may prefer to distinguish sharply between fancy and imagination, and to load the former with all the faults charged upon the latter, fancy after all is only imagination at sport. But even common speech allows us to make a convenient distinction between processes not psychologically distinct. Thus "fanciful"

means imaginative in no good sense. Only when the unreal or untrue is pictured, ought the picturing to be stigmatized as fanciful. Without doubt the mind can toy with the untrue and unreal. It can please itself with whimsies. But that it is able to do this does not prove that it is able to do nothing better. That one can play and likes to play, does not settle it that he cannot work and would not like to work. And, if Jack or Harry, or even his father, does on occasion disport himself with a deal of energy, it by no means follows that his energy is either then or ever quite thrown away. We need, however, some way to tell whether we are catching the fellow at his pranks or at serious toil. Surely it need not be so hard to find out which he is about. But we require tests as to whether imagination is now sporting with trifles or delving deep into truth. We are obliged to suspect that the imaginings of a child are mere fancies; although students of the child-mind know better now than to flog its fancies as lies. But a man's imaginings may be as trusty as a child's are trivial. And there are tests efficient enough to indorse to us the critical judgments that attend upon a strong imagination, as also its capacity to help on the progress of knowledge.

Imagination is mental picturing, and lively picturing. Now when the mind attempts a lively picture of the unseen, it is utterly baffled if the notions which it tries to put together will not stay together. The livelier the mental picture, the more obviously incoherent may be the combination; and to reject so futile an admixture is to obey reason. In fact, reason is best able to judge, when the vividness of imagination exposes the real character of the objects imagined and makes conspicuous that either some of them are false or at least the attempt to combine them is a mistake. Cherubs' heads with wings, which the old Italians painted with so light a touch, are lovely symbols of swift and adoring intelligence; and, although altogether

fanciful, they do not affront reason, because, like other conventional symbols, they avoid pretense of reality. But if we were seriously asked to imagine cherubs as heads needing to be moved, all of us to-day are physiologists enough to see that wings so set could not answer the purpose, and to see this as soon as we imagine the winged heads.

The ordinary process of imagination is synthetic. In fine arts and poetry, in romance and history, in science, philosophy, and theology, the business of imagination is to put things together. It finds things together. Nothing in nature exists apart. If it did, it would be waste material, like ill-estimated heaps of sand, lumps of hardened mortar, and fragments of brick defacing the street before a new house. Souls of men conscious of selfhood are the only discrete entities, and then only as to the solitariness and originality inseparable from will as will. A human soul would be inhuman if it attempted to exist alone. And so imagination seldom has any proper business except putting together things which fit. So entirely normal, so essentially valid, is this process, that, when ideal combinations remain in free union, the imagined picture is universally accepted as essentially true. The literary critic does not find the well-worn word "verisimilitude" express his conception of the authority which belongs to well-imagined compositions. He is not content to say that the imagined hero or incident is like the truth, or unlike it; he says the story is "convincing" or "not convincing," as though it were a lawyer's brief. The best fiction is truer than any happening; the romancer is a realist, the poet a seer. It is because each is first a critic, although the critical process may be spontaneous, and its verdict felt rather than thought.

Still, imagination may attempt to picture an analysis, even a scientific analysis; but how? Again by synthesis.

If it images an hitherto unknown Argon or Krypton in our atmosphere, the gas it guesses at can be correctly guessed only because there are signs that a thus far undetected "element" is entangled with known elements. But now the chemist's imagination catches a glimpse of its skirt as the wind whirls past, and no other eye except his trained eye is quick enough for that glimpse. He imagines a new element; how will he isolate it and make sure of it? Not by tearing it out, as a boy tears out the wing of a fly or the honey-bag of a bumblebee. He must either first coax the unknown element to combine with some other, and then coax its new company away, or else get the company he finds it in to yield to a stronger affinity. And he will try to imagine the necessary combinations before he attempts them. He would be no better than an old-style alchemist if he worked at haphazard without foreseeing, as in these days he partly may, what will come of his experiment. But when he has entirely determined his new element, and got it by itself, and can talk of its atomic weight with a confidence one might say beyond all imagination, what, after all, does he know about his Argon or his Krypton until he can see what its old companions are without it, or what will come of putting it into strange company? All that we know about chemical elements isolated is but the threshold of knowledge. We know their nature when we know what they do in combination.

If the physical philosopher in thought pursues his analysis far beyond the point where all scientific tests come to a full stop, if he makes bold to imagine all elements analyzed back into one, that one resolved into motion, and motion reduced to an action of God, venturesome and stupendous as the imagined analysis appears, it is idle and presumptuous unless imagination begins where just now it left off, with the last result of its analysis, and shows how from it as "primordial egg" the universe might be

hatched. A question is for the sake of the answer; analysis is for the sake of synthesis.

Combination, then, is the major part of imaginations, and congruity in the combination will hardly be taken for a covert lie. The poet at least is admitted to be a seer; and that which the poet or the philosopher, with his extraordinary power of combination and clarity of vision, can show to be a coherent imagining, this imperiously and successfully demands recognition as truth.

Now beside the poet's gifts of mental vision, of clear-sightedness, of tact in synthetizing, he may put forward another claim in behalf of the critical acumen of his imagination. Among all the materials which his imagination works over, some at least are of the best quality. Certain of his ideas are undisputed truths. With his clear insight and his alert recognition of relations, his true ideas serve him as guides. They take new ideas into their fellowship, and warrant these to be as trusty as themselves. One truth is a criterion of all related truth. The poet's imagination brings up to it other ideas to be tested by it, and advances with joy from that to these, or retreats from them with the decisive repugnance which a false note or a disgusting spectacle produces in a sensitive mind.

In closing this too curt exposition of the imagination's fitness to play the critic and pass judgment, it may be noted, that all ideas, true or false, are so capable of unfolding their contents and of forming at least temporary combinations after their own sort, that a test generally accepted as final is found in the issue of such a development. A tree is known by its fruit. The surest criterion of truth or falsity in a doctrine is to unfold completely what it enfolds, to build a system on it. This is the congenial office of reflective imagination. One of the strongest tendencies of the human mind drives it to undertake this office. No derision of system-making in religious doctrine long ar-

rests or diverts this tendency. When it is checked in one direction, it pushes out in another. The very persons who dislike the outcome of one scheme of ideas, spontaneously, even unconsciously, set about a scheme of their own. And so their ideas come under the test which they hate, have judgment passed upon them as a whole. This tendency to developing and systematizing ideas would not be so irresistible if the process were one chiefly of formal logic. Let those who have worked out sets of notions on a subject which deeply interested them, say whether they went about making up a broad and complete view by studied deduction and formal inference. Systems once made may seek a defense of this sort, as military defense plants its posts in calculated lines on or near the established highways; but the highways are rarely laid out by so mathematical surveying. They get themselves formed along the "lines of least resistance." And so schemes of thought on what subjects you please almost seem to make themselves. Imagination runs to and fro until the highways are beaten smooth by use. Whole generations, successive ages, may be busied in forming them; but, when they have been formed, nobody can dispute whither run these well-worn roads. A scheme of ideas is like such a network of roads traversing a country. By their aid one can readily go from part to part, and know all that is to be found out about the lay of the land and what grows on it. Good or bad as it all may be, or in part be, no one who lives or visits thereabout need remain in doubt of the region which these naturally formed paths traverse and open up.

HOW IMAGINATION MAKES DISCOVERIES.

If now it is recognized that imagination at all provides for a judgment upon the truth or falsity of its own vaticinations; if it so provides by its vision of the invisible, by the distinctness of its vision, by its knack at combining

materials, at testing them by their coherence, by their accord with known truth, and their outcome as unfolded systems,—it needs little more than to be mentioned, that these very means of testing the truth of ideas are, each and all, means of advancing to new truth. Such advance is effected either by the spontaneous self-suggestion of ideas germane to those already seen by the mind in full light, or it is by the more painstaking method of exclusion. In either case the office of imagination is conspicuous. How indispensable that office is, apart from all thus far implied in the process of criticism, one may be pardoned for regarding as undeniable when these three additional points are considered: to wit, a large part of the material to be dealt with is outside of sense, and as such is wholly imaginary; the material which can be known through the senses may be assembled before the mind at once only by an act of imagination; the end sought, the law to be discovered, the ultimate truth which includes all truths already known, is but an imagined end, law, truth. This does not mean that the entire task falls to imagination, but it means that no long step can be taken in the progress of knowledge unless imagination lends the help of her strong hand. Let us see.

1. The material to be looked into is, in large part, beyond the reach of sense. Familiar illustrations are atoms and the ether. But although no approach to seeing or otherwise "sensing" an atom is possible, what prodigious strides modern chemistry has taken by aid of these imagined ultimates of matter! And while physical philosophers sometimes amuse themselves by indicating the difficulties involved in the conception of a perfectly fluid and elastic medium filling space, physical science itself has been all afloat in that thin medium and safely borne afar by an imaginary reality. Nor has any one been able to suggest a substitute for the ether which would serve science as well,

and be tangible too. How one must wonder to find the most aggressively realistic of all modern knowledge, to wit physical science, resting on a transcendental substance, if one may so call it, the luminiferous ether, and built out of imaginary materials, the indivisible atoms! Imagination could hardly set up a bolder claim to trustiness than this.

As the realities fundamental to physical science are purely imaginary, it should surprise no one that such also are the objects of mathematical reasoning. Nothing else so subtly abstract, so ineffably imaginary, as those ideal quantities and relations which are the objects of mathematical exploration. In large part they are capable of expression only by symbols. Yet the mind is so constituted that, if it deals with these imaginings at all, it can accept no other findings than those of this mystic science. At the same time these findings inclose the largest knowledge of Nature. Mathematical reasoning is a strenuous and irresistible incantation to which the heights and the depths give up their secrets. What the laws of mind require us to imagine concerning the world about us is invariably matter of fact. Things answer to thoughts, the laws of matter to the laws of mind. And so, in the orderly dreaming of trained imagination, knowledge moves on often with quick, long strides that defy frolicsome and light-footed fancy herself to follow.

2. If a great part of the material with which progressing study has to deal is, of its very nature, as we have just seen, wholly beyond the senses, another great part is within the range of sense; but it is never at one time in range on a scale sufficiently large. The inductions of science commonly rest on former observations, not on observations at the moment. The story of human history is also a story of persons, of ages, long vanished. If truth about anything not before the sense is to be learned at all, it is imagination that musters and arrays the facts. Thus the second

as well as the first condition of progress in knowledge is supplied by this faculty.

3. The third is that the issue sought by study is an unseen reality, unseen both before and after it is reached. What more tenuous abstraction than a law of nature? As just noticed, it can often be stated in a mathematical formula. The abstract laws of concrete things are the furthest reach of human science. And they are science. We know by their means the safety of a suspension bridge and of the planet we live on. The mind's realizing sense is capable of forming and of lending aid in the justification of these final convictions. Thus much can be said of truth already in possession: if universal, it is a generalization with which only the mind's eye can deal.

So long as it remains an object of search, the truth is wholly a creature of imagination, and must first be imagined if it is to be found. The investigator arranges his materials, and asks their meaning under the guidance of a guessed answer provisionally adopted. Hypothesis or theory always falls short of knowledge, but is serviceable in the pursuit of knowledge. Investigation is not aimless wandering in hope of coming out where one would be glad to find himself; it is not a chance tumbling about of children's lettered blocks, counting on one's luck to spell out the truth. It is such a following of clues as existing information and sagacious guessing will afford; it is the slow reading off of so much truth as facts deftly put together can be made to spell. But in all skilfully pursued inquiry conjecture must precede certainty. In thus adding to the common stock of knowledge, the service of imagination is even more obvious than its ability to estimate its own operations. It is bent on progress, not on criticism; but, in the service of truth, that which, in a sort of metonymy, I have called its critical office, is indispensable as a quick way of testing "guesses at truth."

Now this account of the competence of imagination to serve the interests of knowledge has entirely failed, if it leaves the impression that imagination defies reason, goes beyond reason, or in any way is at odds with reason. Facility in picture-making provides its own safeguard when the relations of imagination to reason are normal and free. Imagination's office is to make the office of reason easy. And it succeeds so well, as was remarked at the beginning of this article, that in many cases the decision is not due to deliberation, but is virtually made in making the picture. So that imagination figures over and again as both artist and critic. The process of preparing the case for the inspection of reason is such as to exhibit the reasonableness of the process. To recapitulate: Imagination is mental vision, vivid and comprehensive; it puts together materials the coherence of which is to be determined, a coherence which is of peculiar significance when it includes the accord of questionable materials with unquestioned truth; or it swiftly unfolds a fruitful idea into a scheme of ideas, and thus definitely tests the veracity of the initial idea by its outcome. So far its competence to sit in judgment. Its competence to aid in discovery of new truth is plain when we reflect, first, that the data which are to be constructed into new truth are largely objects of imagination, being either abstractions or concrete facts rarely all present to the senses of the explorer; and, secondly, that the truth itself, if a general truth, is an object of imagination alone, never capable of subjection to the senses.

Of course too wide claims must be avoided. The faculty which pictures, may picture the false as well as the true. Furthermore, not all sorts of reality are equally subject to the plastic hand of imagination. Nor, for that matter, are all thinkers alike able to make use of this faculty. Some cannot imagine the moves necessary to make on a chessboard, or are unable to carry in the mind's eye the groups

of lines which lend themselves to a geometrical demonstration. But, if the reader will take the trouble to run out the thought for himself, he will find that among the most honored and practical of callings are employments to which the aid of imagination is indispensable; that faith itself is largely either a vision of the invisible or dependent on such a vision; that imagination, made bold by its success in determining what Christian truths may enter into experience, and thus what truths actually abide as Christian convictions, ventures to take up the perennial and therefore outstanding problems of Christian thought, and to reduce the problems to clearest assertions of indisputable realities; that it will outrun all merely theological concernments, will take in hand moral and spiritual interests, and will enable the believer who makes best use of its offered aid, to live in full view of inspiring realities; and so, looking not at things seen, but things unseen, he will walk by imagination, not by sight.